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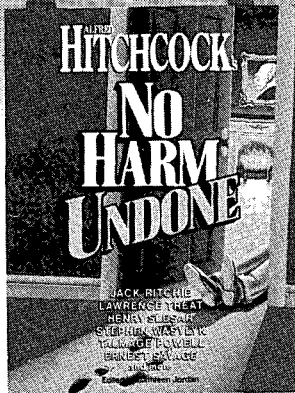
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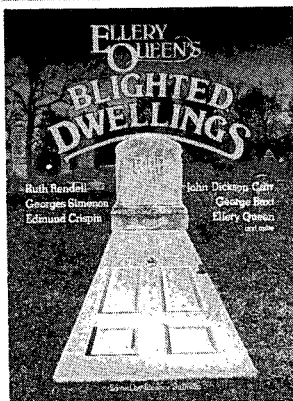
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

In this space we have had occasion in the past to mention a couple of newsletters or journals published for mystery aficionados, but there are others we haven't yet mentioned. One of the best—most fun—is *Mystery & Detective Monthly*, put out by Cap'n Bob Napier.

MDM consists almost entirely of letters from its readers, and amounts to a continuing "conversation" (thirty or forty pages long) among several dozen people. That is, a letter in #37 from Herb Resnicow, for example, addresses a number of writers who raised questions or made comments in #36—Margaret Maron, Terri Krause, Michael Reilly, Ilene Novack, Linda Toole, Blythe and Sweet, and Paul Bishop. In #38, Marvin Lachman comments on

something in Resnicow's reply to Margaret Maron, Bill Crider does so on Resnicow's response to Linda Toole, and so on. These comments and questions have to do with all sorts of things about the mystery world—with books and authors and plots and characters and goings-on at Bouchercon and pseudonyms and how one arranges one's library and just about anything you can think of, often as a running dialogue over a number of issues, sometimes as single queries or observations. The correspondents frequently report on books they've read recently and exchange views with other correspondents about them—there's a lot of that.

If this sounds confusing, our apologies. It's not easy to explain, and if you do read MDM, (Continued on page 109)

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FICTION

A Romantic Murder

by David Pierce



Illustration by Peter D. Fasolino

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Lawrence turned the doorknob and breathed a sigh of relief when he discovered it unlocked. Many times the client remembered every detail, time, place, money, alibi, and then would forget to leave the door unlocked. He silently thanked Mr. Thigpen and tiptoed into the shadowy kitchen, not much more than a shadow himself in his black longsleeved turtleneck, black slacks, black Reeboks, and black ski mask rolled up on his forehead. He wouldn't pull the mask down until later when it came time to earn his money.

Once in the strange house Lawrence turned up the sensitivity dial on his senses as a good writer should: the refrigerator hummed, almost growled, protecting its cold goods like a guard dog; the green numbers of the digital clock on the range glowed 12:15, the colon between the hours and minutes blinking once every second, as steady as clockwork; and the only light, the low wattage incandescent over the range, draped a yellowish tent over the harvest gold range and onto the speckled linoleum floor. Oh, this is good, he thought. Got to write all this down when I get back to my notebook.

Lawrence Longfellow had decided to be a writer his sophomore year in high school after hearing for the two-dozen-th time, "Longfellow? Are you going to be a writer, too?" He soon found out that once he said yes, people usually just said, "Good luck," and that was that. But if he said no or I don't know, it was always, "Well, what else *can* you do with a name like Longfellow?"

So twenty-one odd jobs and fifteen years later, Lawrence was the proud published author of two odes: "Ode to Cold, Cold Spring Water" and "Ode to the Miners of the Motherlode Who Never Found It" (a poem which every other magazine rejected because of some major scanning problems). And for his efforts he received four contributor's copies and a year's subscription to the *San Andreas Fault Quarterly*.

Lawrence lied to his family about his writing success in order to explain the Porsche and the home in upstate New York. He told them he was using the pen name Stephen King instead of his real name because Longfellow suddenly didn't sound like a credible name for a writer. His family, living in a small town in Tennessee, was very proud of Lawrence and went often on all-day excursions to bookstores to count the number of books Lawrence had written. But Lawrence, aka Stephen King, had a feeling his luck was about to change. He'd been working this same job, a very lucrative job

at that, for the past year and had filled a notebook with experiences and insights for a book that'd make a Robert Ludlum novel look like a Walt Disney production. He even had a working title: *The Personal Diary of a Hit Man*.

Mr. Thigpen had told Lawrence that he wouldn't be down for his midnight snack until about twelve thirty, so Lawrence used this free time to explore the refrigerator for some fringe benefits.

He discovered a brand-new tub of onion dip and then rummaged through the cabinets until he found a pack of wavy chips. Lawrence made a big production of the party favors. He spread out a napkin, poured himself a glass of milk, and used the first chip on the dip as if it was a shovel. With the goods poised before his open mouth, Lawrence froze at the sight of a shadowy figure slipping in through the same door he had entered earlier.

Lawrence's eyes had acclimated somewhat to the yellowish light but, still, all he could make out was a dark form easing the door closed and tiptoeing into the room. Just as quietly as the dark figure tiptoed across the linoleum, Lawrence lowered the chip and dip to the counter, left his stool, and crept backwards until his searching hand found the refrigerator door. He yanked the door open and a monolith of light fell into the dark room and lit up everything in its path, with the exception of the shadow frozen on tiptoes. Lawrence could see it wasn't a shadow at all but only someone dressed in a black turtleneck, black slacks, black Reeboks, and a black ski mask. The mask was rolled up on this person's forehead so that only a rosy complexion, beautiful almond-shaped eyes, and a delectable nose could be seen.

"Barbara?" Lawrence asked incredulously. "Barbara Monroe? Is that you?"

The face of the shadow smiled into the light of the refrigerator and answered, "Why, Lawrence Longfellow. How long has it been?"

Lawrence closed the refrigerator and offered his first true love a stool at the counter where they sat and talked about life since high school.

"So did you ever pursue that acting career?" Lawrence asked.

"What else could I do with a name like Monroe? I've made a few commercials. Maybe you've seen a couple," she said hopefully. "Do you remember the Bow Wow Burgers for dogs?" Lawrence nodded. "Well, that was me setting the bowl on the floor. You can see both of my arms *and* my feet." Her pink face beamed with pride.

Lawrence was genuinely impressed. That was closer to big time

than having two poems published in the *San Andreas Fault Quarterly*. He pushed an unbroken chip into his mouth and crunched. It was about then that he fell in love all over again with Barbara's almond-shaped eyes. Had he ever noticed a woman's eyes before? Maybe only now because everything else was so well camouflaged, he rationalized. But he had to admit that even as a silhouette Barbara was . . . well . . . womanly.

As Lawrence recalled, she was one of the few girls in high school who was womanly *before* graduation. She had been the buxom blonde captain of the cheerleaders who sat next to him in study hall (only because Coach Bryant had been a stickler for alphabetical seating arrangements). And although Lawrence was head over heels in love with her, they never spoke to one another unless Barbara needed a pencil. (Lawrence always had a pocket full of pencils. What else was a kid named Longfellow supposed to have?) And then it was always the same predictable dialogue: "Have you got a pencil I could borrow?" "Yeah, sure." Lawrence figured he must have told her "*Yeah, sure*" a dozen and a half times his senior year.

He was flattered that she remembered his pursuit of a writing career, but then she brought up the same thing again. He nearly told her about the odes, but after hearing about the Bow Wow Burgers thought differently and told her instead of his plans for a novel. Barbara thought that was such a great idea she offered to help him out by lending some of her personal experiences, some that she promised would make for juicy chapters.

"And this experience would make a heck of a twist, don't you think?" he said. "I come here to knock off this guy's wife, run into an old high school sweetie— uh, I mean friend," he blushed but continued, "and you were just coming here to . . ." Lawrence searched his memory but came up empty. "Barbara, what *are* you doing here?"

Barbara lowered her eyes and a wisp of blonde hair escaped from her ski mask and fell across her right eye. She looked up demurely and Lawrence reached instinctively for the pencil in his pocket he knew she would ask for. The two almonds became troubled. "Lawrence, I had no idea you'd be here. Mr. Thigpen hired me to—"

"Ahh," he said and nodded with understanding as if she had explained fully. "He *did* seem terribly nervous when he hired me. Of course you know most of our clients always are. I guess he just wanted to be doubly sure. Ha-ha."

The sound of footsteps ~~caused them both to~~ look toward a dark-

ened doorway that led into the interior of the house. Lawrence glanced at the green digits on the range, 12:35, past time for Mr. Thigpen's midnight snack. He turned back to Barbara, who had disappeared behind the counter. She pressed her finger to her lips and made a shushing gesture just as the door opened and Mr. Thigpen, clad in a red plaid housecoat with drab-green pajamas underneath entered the kitchen. It was obvious he had not taken the time to comb what little hair he had before coming down. The little tufts on each side just above the ears stuck out at curious angles, accidentally creating the latest teenage rage.

Mr. Thigpen took one look at the chips and dip and said to Lawrence, "Hey, kid. You've got a job to do, don't you?" He jerked a thumb back over his shoulder apparently in the direction of the Thigpen bedroom where he would find Mrs. Thigpen sleeping. Lawrence left Barbara crouched behind the counter and squeezed past Mr. Thigpen in the doorway, rolling the ski mask down as he disappeared to earn his money.

Barbara dared to peek over the edge of the counter after Lawrence had gone. She screwed her face up into an expression of disgust at the sight of the disheveled Mr. Thigpen and the even more disgusting sandwich he was creating. Something like ham or bologna hung out unevenly around the edges of the bun, dripping mayonnaise, mustard, and pickle relish onto the counter. Such a slob, Barbara thought. He should be happy that *any* woman would want to live with him and now he was trying to kill that one. *Tisk, tisk.*

As Mr. Thigpen ate his sandwich, accompanied by the appropriate sound effects, Barbara crept unnoticed to the back door, turned the knob, and jarred it just wide enough for her to slip through, but for the second time that night, the warm-cold light of the refrigerator fell on her.

"Oh good, good," Mr. Thigpen, manning the refrigerator door, said. "Perfect timing. He just went up. I'll go into the living room and take care of it while you go up and take care of *him*."

She had disliked his shifty, peanut-shaped eyes before and liked them even less now.

Barbara had to admit Mr. Thigpen did have an ingenious plan: hire a killer to knock off his wife and trash the place to make it look like a robbery; then hire another killer to kill the first one,

keep the gun and tell the authorities you shot the intruder. With such a large insurance policy on the wife, if she suddenly got knocked off by a mysterious, disappearing intruder, someone might ask questions. But if she gets knocked off and Mr. Thigpen comes up with the dead body of the said intruder, he's a hero—and a rich man.

Barbara sat motionless on a stool at the counter and watched five green minutes go by on the range clock. Instead of going upstairs and killing Lawrence, she was absently admiring Mrs. Thigpen's kitchen decor. With the exception of Mr. Thigpen's mess, it was a quaint, attractive room: wooden cannisters were stacked on the counter in one corner; blue pot holders with chickens and cows and pigs and ducks on them matched the towels hanging from the drawer handles; three china cups on saucers dotted the windowsill over the sink; and some copper-bottomed pots and pans adorned a carousel that hung from the ceiling above the range.

Barbara felt cosy in the kitchen, comfortable with the domestic atmosphere. This was exactly how she would fix her kitchen if she had one, she thought. Must have been professionally done.

She couldn't do it. Not to Lawrence Longfellow. It had been such a pleasant surprise to see him. And though they had hardly said a sentence to one another in high school (wasn't he the quiet kid with lots of pencils?), it was plain to see that they now had lots in common. And he had looked so cute with the ski mask rolled up on his forehead, his eyes like two little acorns.

Now she remembered! His picture had been right next to hers in the school annual. That's how she was able to remember his name so easily. And in the picture he wore those awful glasses that covered up those pretty little acorn-shaped eyes; she would have remembered those.

No. She had been wanting to make a clean break from this line of work and maybe tonight was the night. She'd break her contract, get a job as a waitress like all the other aspiring actresses, and continue to work for that one big break.

The sound of furniture crashing to the floor and vases and candy dishes shattering came from beyond the darkened door. Barbara slipped a wavy chip into her mouth, crunched much louder than Mr. Thigpen's concert, and waited.

Barbara was having a vision of Lawrence's dead body lying across Mrs. Thigpen's dead body, as had been the plan, when Lawrence

walked back into the kitchen. She noticed he had a .45 automatic just like hers tucked into the front of his belt. He looked at Barbara and shook his head. His eyes were two wistful acorns. "I couldn't do it, Barbara. For the first time I'm breaking a contract." He laid his .45 on the counter. His smile beamed brighter than a refrigerator light and Barbara knew exactly how he felt. She laid her .45 on the counter next to his.

"I'm quitting, too," she said.

Lawrence pushed the dip aside and took Barbara's hand. The acorns looked lovingly into the almonds. "Do you know I once drew a heart around our pictures in the school annual?" he said. She squeezed his hand affectionately.

The moment was shattered by the crashing sound of Mr. Thigpen bursting through the kitchen door. He flipped the lights on and stood squarely and squatly in the doorway. In the full brightness of two hundred watts everything was in living color, and Barbara and Lawrence could tell by Mr. Thigpen's livid face that Mr. Thigpen was dangerously enraged.

"What the hell's going on here?" He looked to Barbara, then to Lawrence, then to Barbara, then to Lawrence. "She's still up there!" he said to Lawrence. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of Mrs. Thigpen's bedroom. The cords in his neck stood out and pulsed as steadily as a digital clock. "Snoring like a bear! You . . . you're fired! Do you hear me!" He pointed a fat, livid finger at Lawrence's nose. Slowly the realization that he must be talking to a ghost spread over his face. His jaw quivered with anger. "And—and what are *you* doing here anyway?" He looked accusingly at Barbara. "What is *he* doing here?" he said to her. He swung his arm about until his fat finger was aimed at Barbara's nose. "You're fired, too!" Then he waved both hands frantically at the two shadows. "BOTH OF YOU ARE FIRED!"

Lawrence and Barbara fired their .45's simultaneously, producing a .90 caliber blast that jiggled the three china teacups on their saucers. Two neat holes appeared in Mr. Thigpen's housecoat, allowing some of the lividness in his face to spill out. He fell backwards and lay motionless with an accusatory finger pointing towards the ceiling for nearly half a minute before his arm fell lifelessly by his side.

Since Mrs. Thigpen never awoke during the commotion, Lawrence made an anonymous phone call to the police department from the trashed-out living room and then dropped the telephone into

the Thigpens' thirty gallon aquarium (something Lawrence had always wanted to do) before he and Barbara went out for pizza.

Three months later Lawrence submitted a poem entitled "Ode to Monroe" and signed it simply, Longfellow. *The San Andreas Fault Quarterly* loved it, rushed Lawrence his two contributor's copies, and published the poem only a month after he had submitted it. Later a national tabloid picked up the ode and ran it on the front page with the heading HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW WOOS SEXY MARILYN MONROE IN SPIRIT WORLD.

Lawrence proposed to Barbara in front of a newsstand and, in between guffaws, she answered yes. Three months after that Lawrence sold *The Personal Diary of a Hit Man* for a gargantuan sum and was offered an enormous advance for the sequel, *The Personal Diary of a Hit Woman*. He wrote home and told his family he was now writing under his real name of Lawrence Longfellow, but they didn't believe him and kept buying Stephen King books and faithfully visiting the town's run of bookstores for Mr. King's latest.

Barbara stayed busy for the most part with her co-starring role in the film version of *The Personal Diary of a Hit Man*, so busy that she had to hire an interior decorator to revamp their beautiful new home.

It seems Mr. Thigpen had taken out a hefty insurance policy on himself in order to avert any suspicion about collecting on the wife's policy. So, one week after Mrs. Thigpen found her husband laid out dead in the doorway, she was a wealthy lady (some consolation for the stains on the rug). She used part of the money to start a business she'd always dreamed of.

"Okay . . . Okay . . . Yes, I can do that," Mrs. Thigpen answered the caller on the telephone. "Thank you and I'll call you regarding the final decisions." She hung up and stared at the telephone, hardly believing her ears. How exciting! Monroe and Longfellow, the country's hottest new couple, wanted her to remodel their entire house! This is it, she thought. The break she was looking for. One sure to be a boon for Thigpen Interiors.

FICTION

Chump Money

by Sharon E. Martin

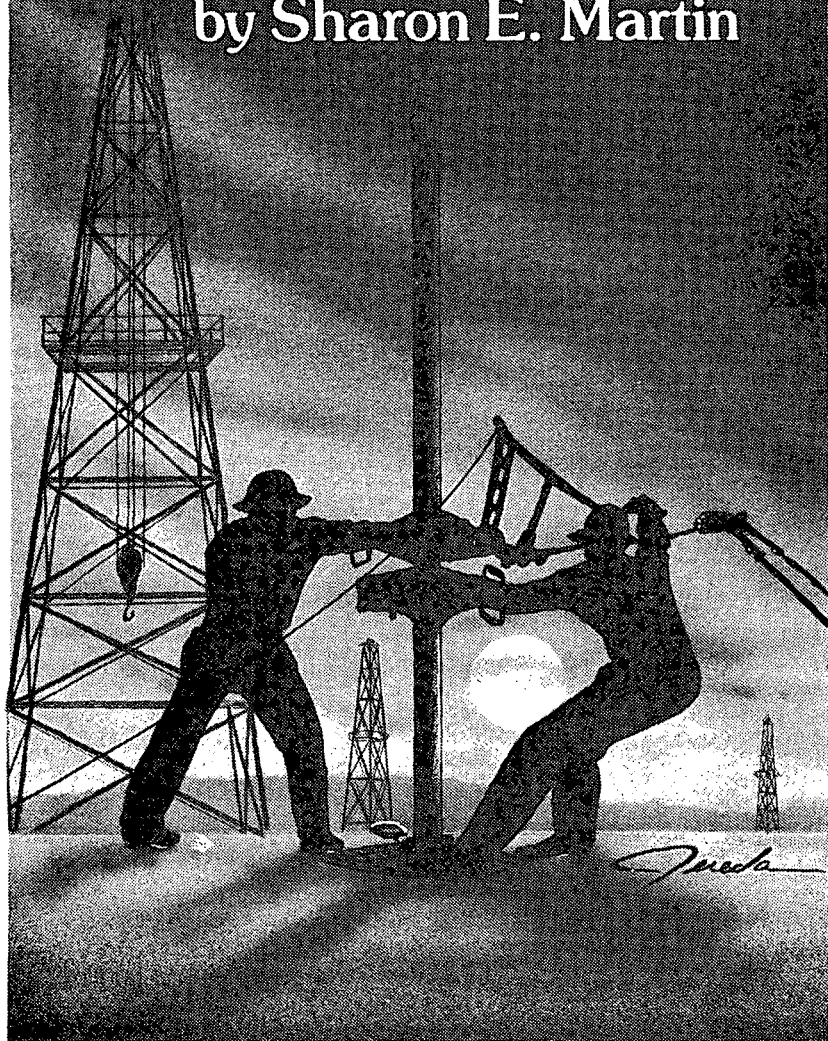


Illustration by Joe Jereda

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When I read the sticker on the bumper of the beat-up old GMC pickup, I thought of my brother. It said, "Please, God, let there be just one more oil boom and I promise not to piss it all away this time."

Oh, Carly wasn't the only one. Lots of Oklahomans spent the late seventies and early eighties in unaccustomed luxury, and just as we were becoming accustomed, it went away. Just like the bar fly when the cowboy's money was gone.

Not that I'm one to talk. I have a mink jacket and a sapphire ring that will knock your lights out, but they don't help me much with my waitress job.

Carly. Just out of high school he was pulling down three hundred grand a year with a scheme he and my ex cooked up. They were acting as middlemen between the big oil companies and the farmers in the Anadarko Basin. Carly was driving a new black four by four and wearing eelskin boots.

I love my brother. Don't misunderstand. He's sweet, good-looking, and he doesn't mind hard work, but his smarts and his luck come and go, and they usually go at the same time. It was during one of these down-on-his-luck times when everything started happening.

He was living in Bristow,

about a mile from my little place, in a motel called The Byron. The Byron is owned by a friend of mine, one Ollie Bogart, and is frequented by oil people and their periphery.

Carly wasn't the only one living there who'd lost his house, his truck, and his family. Not that he lost his family, exactly. He knew right where they were.

Anyway, he ran into a guy he'd done business with before and they were trying to raise money for a well, a sure thing about five miles out of Bristow. Well, I know sure things.

They came to me for money.

"Look, sis, why can't you sell that coat? What good does it do you anyway? You have anyplace to wear it?"

"Yeah. To work. It beats no coat at all. You know what Annie said last night when we were closing up? 'God, that's soft. Feels almost real.' What do you think you can get for a used mink? Enough to get another warm coat?"

"What about one of your rings?"

"No way. I have to hang on to something to remind me that I was rich once. Know what I think?"

"You going to start in again?"

I ignored that remark, since that was exactly what I had in mind. "You need to find a job that pays money. You have a

wife and kid that can't live on dry holes the way you can."

"But this is a sure thing. The geologist I talked to said he'd buy in if I can get Potts to lease."

"Lord knows you shouldn't have any trouble talking that old rancher out of a lease." Carly can sweet-talk June out of a June bug. "How much he want to buy in for?"

"Who?"

"The geologist."

"He didn't say."

"How much you have to have? Total." I saw Carly wink at his buddy. "I want to talk to this geologist, and this isn't an investment. It's a loan. I suppose you still have a drilling rig, Michaels?"

Carly's friend shifted nervously in his seat. I never had liked Michaels.

"Yes."

"You drilling this one?"

"Yes."

"So your money's coming off the top. How much you buying in for?"

"I'm not. Figured Carly here could use a break."

"No bullshit, Michaels. Why aren't you buying in?"

He traced the pattern of my Navajo rug with his boots.

"No money."

Carly's eyes narrowed. "How much money you got, Angel?"

"None," I lied. "But I know

where I can get a loan. Just make sure I can pay it back. And before you get a penny, I want to talk to this geologist."

I put on my best wool suit, and left the mink at home. Days were still too warm for it, and I didn't want a snow job from this geologist. I just hoped Carly hadn't told him I'd studied geology. It never pays to know too much. I was a couple of semesters from my degree when the oil prices started dropping and the alimony dried up. If geologists were buying into wells now, it was probably a good thing I quit school and got a job.

Ten thousand dollars. It wasn't much. I watched a dry hole eat a million once, and this hole, dry or not, wasn't going to get my last bit of savings. It's been suggested I'm blind where Carly's concerned. I'm not. When he gets involved with oil, money, or women, I know to watch out.

I met the geologist in The Byron's coffee shop, a place of substantial food and pretty waitresses quite different from the restaurant on the turnpike where I work. I picked him out from the roughnecks and company presidents, his ruddy face and close-cropped hair setting him apart. He stood as I approached, and I noted his height at an inch or two more than my own six feet.

"Georgie Coxson," he said. "You must be Angel Ride. Carly's told me a lot about you."

I held out my hand and he shook it. A thin, honey-haired waitress brought coffee and Georgie brought out his maps.

"See, here. I think there's something in the Viola limestone."

"Something?"

He grinned. "Oil. Have you seen a map like this before?"

"Sure. Carly's always bringing them around."

"See this ridge? If Carly can get the Potts lease, they can drill four wells along the spine. I think they should drill here first." He jabbed the map with a manicured finger.

Four wells. Three extra holes for Carly to pour money into. I didn't picture it as three extra producers. Carly's not that lucky.

It did look good, though.

When we left, Georgie slipped a five under the saucer for the pretty little thing that served us. Small town, but I didn't know her. Bogart brought girls in from all over. I regarded the tip as an omen. Georgie was feeling lucky.

Still, the willies crawled up my backbone when I cashed in my CD. I didn't know if it was the money it cost me to cash in early or the thought of doing business with Carly.

The trouble started a few days after the drilling did. Carly called from The Byron's pay phone. I could hear the rattle of cups and the boisterous voices in the background.

"Michaels says he's going to pull out if I don't give him half my quarter."

"Let him. He's getting paid. Pay him off and get another driller."

When Carly didn't answer I waited for the rest of the bad news.

"Can't. The rig broke down first day out. We had to buy a part. Money's gone. Got the pipe, though."

"Gone!"

"Quit screaming, sis. Michaels is good for it. I made him sign a paper for the money."

"Good for it! He's strong-arming you and you say he's good for it." I could hear my voice going from shrill to croak as the realization hit me that my money was gone. I hung up on Carly. I had some serious thinking to do.

He didn't call for a couple of days. When I'm upset he stays away. One of the smartest things he does.

When I heard from him, I was just coming in from working a double shift. I could hear the phone ringing, and my hands shook from fatigue as I fumbled

with the lock on my front door.

Actually it was Carly's wife calling. Now, I don't have anything against Charity personally, but I think she was misnamed. She claims divorce is against her religion, but I think the real reason she won't give Carly a divorce is she wants him to pay for every dalliance he's ever had, including the ones that happened before she came along.

She slobbered into the phone, her hysteria splattering through the mouthpiece. "He's half dead. Get over here quick. Michaels has killed him sure."

Over here quick. An hour's drive to Charity's house in Tulsa, and whoever was dying needed a doctor before I could get there. "Who's dead?" I asked.

"Carly. And he's not dead. Almost dead," she said more quietly.

"Okay. Take him to the emergency room at Saint Francis. I'll meet you there."

"My car isn't here. Mom's using it today."

"Well, how did he get there?"

"Some guys dropped him off. Some of Michaels' guys, I guess. They were in a big hurry to get out of here."

I bet they were.

"Okay. I'm on my way." I slipped out of my uniform as I hung up the phone. They didn't take him to the hospital. How bad could it be?

I assessed the damage when I got there. He reclined on the couch in Charity's cluttered living room. Cracked jaw, probably. Broken thumb, definitely. His left one. His right hand was saved for the signing away of the well rights.

I comforted him. "The paper's no good signed under duress. We'll get this worked out. I'll call Nigel."

"Is that the best you can do?"

"He's a lawyer, isn't he? You're going to need one when the royalty owners find out about this." Or when a sister came to her senses.

Carly cradled his daughter, a shield against the pain, and against Charity perhaps. Jordan solemnly looked up at her father and Charity watched them with a mixture of distaste and greed. She knew about the well, then. If Carly came out of this with anything, she'd get it. At least she took good care of Jordan.

"Give Jordan to Charity. We'll go to the emergency room."

He just nodded. It probably hurt to talk.

While a nurse patched him up, I called Nigel. He answered the phone himself. Another omen? Getting past his secretary was a major feat.

A doctor set the broken bones and predicted Carly'd need surgery on his hand. The bluish bruise along his jaw was just

that. A bruise. No wiring required. The pain pills Carly swallowed caused his eyelids to droop. I strapped him into the front seat of my Trans Am, and I didn't say anything when the nurse who wheeled him out slipped a piece of paper into his hand. When it fell from his clutch onto the floor, I tucked it into his pocket.

"We're going to Nigel's," I said. "He says you can hide out there until he takes care of this."

He lifted his head off the head rest as acknowledgement.

Nigel met us at his house. He came out to meet us as I pulled in beside his Porsche.

"I've got to go back to the office. Just make yourself comfortable."

"I'm not staying."

"Oh?" He looked disappointed.

"You want dinner later?"

"Best offer this week. Where?"

"My place. I've had enough of The Byron lately, and I make it a practice not to eat where I work. One more thing. Can I use your Jeep? I want to drive out to the well site, but Michaels knows my car."

"Sure. What time's dinner?"

"Seven."

As Nigel drove away I looked in on Carly. His closed eyes and gentle snores told me to go on about my business.

The Jeep started with a grunt and I steered it toward Potts' ranch.

It didn't take a degree to know why Michaels wanted Carly's quarter. I parked at a deserted farmhouse near the section line and took a trail that started at an old barn and ended at the fence that enclosed Potts' wheatfield. I could hear the clatter of the pipesetter. If they were setting pipe, they expected oil.

I stood behind the windbreak trees and watched the machine that lowered the twenty-foot joints of pipe into the ground. Above the rabble, voices bounced angrily off the machinery. I recognized Georgie Coxson's, the geologist's.

"Just because you can take that fool Ride, don't think you can get your foul hands on my quarter."

Michaels laughed. "Your quarter? You wouldn't have anything if I hadn't put you on to Ride. The ranchers around here won't talk to anyone else. He's honest."

I could tell by the way he underscored that last word he considered honesty a defect of character.

Conversation ended. The ground began to rock and the sound of an explosion ripped through the windbreak trees along the fence. I clung to a gnarled cedar, gasping for what

bit of air the explosion hadn't sucked away. I turned to survey the damage. All I could see was oil spewing over the top of the pipesetter and black-covered men running and jumping like a bunch of little boys in a summer shower.

I checked my first impulse, elation. Logic told me it was probably only a gas pocket blowing oil, but the longer it blew the less logic appealed to me. I watched until the well was capped before I jogged back up the cattle trail to the barn and to the Jeep.

I considered calling. Nigel, but decided to save the news for dinner. Carly could wait for it, too, until Nigel could assure me the paper he'd signed was no good. I pulled onto the road as soon as the trail of dust from a passing car settled.

Prospects of a pleasant evening faded as soon as I turned into Nigel's long drive. No Trans. Am. Instinct said no Carly, either. Both doors were locked. At least he didn't leave in a hurry.

The clock in the truck said six. My body, after two shifts, Tulsa, and the blow-out at the well, said later. And my dinner date would arrive in an hour.

"Damn you, Carly," I screamed at the house. "Can't you just stay put? Just stay safe for a little while?"

He was probably with the pretty nurse who slipped him the note, but I passed all the places he might be on my way home.

While the shepherd's pie baked, I showered. When the timer sounded I was dressed in a denim skirt and a cotton sweater, and my short, wet hair was combed back away from my face. I set the table with my Frankoma pottery, took two crystal goblets from the high cabinets above the refrigerator, and unearthed a bottle of Burgundy put away for special occasions. I set salads in the refrigerator and sat myself in my old wooden rocker to wait.

I must have dozed. The pounding on the door startled me awake. Nigel stood there, grimy and scared, until I pulled him inside. He tracked black across the entry hall. I stopped him at the edge of my rug. He looked around the living room.

"He's not here?"

"Carly? No. Where have you been?"

"Looking for Carly."

"Yeah? Well, you get into the shower. I'll make coffee."

The clock on the kitchen wall said nine twenty.

I took coffee to the bathroom and carried the dirty clothes away to the screened porch behind the kitchen.

"I'll call Charity," I screamed

over the beat of the shower. "God knows why, but maybe he went back there."

She answered the phone on the first ring. "Sorry I couldn't call sooner," I said. "He'll be all right, but the doctor said there might be some trouble with the hand."

Charity never could pass up an "I know," and she said nothing.

"Just thought you might like to know. Give Jordan hugs for me." I pressed the button before I touched down the receiver. He wasn't there.

I found some of Carly's clothes for Nigel. Maybe giving his clothes away would break him of dropping off his laundry.

"Clothes are on the vanity," I said.

Nigel grunted, and I left to stick supper in the microwave. The smells of beef and onion filled the kitchen.

Nigel stood in the doorway, a towel wrapped around his lean middle. He dried his shaggy gray hair with another, and had started to speak when someone tapped at the door.

"Carly," he said.

It wasn't. The deputy looked apologetic. "Ms. Ride. We're looking for your brother. I understand he had a little run-in with John Michaels this morning. We need to ask him a few questions."

"Call me Angel," I said, showing him into the kitchen. "Coffee?"

He shook his head. "Hello, Nigel." He raised his eyebrows.

"Hello, Roy," Nigel said. He slipped out of the room and returned wearing Carly's jeans.

"He's looking for Carly," I said.

The deputy looked away from me. "John Michaels is dead. We got an anonymous phone call about two hours ago said we'd find him out on the old bridge road."

Nigel looked wary. "What's this got to do with Carly?"

"Just needed to ask him a few questions about the little ruckus this morning."

"News travels fast around here, doesn't it?" I said, but Nigel frowned to shush me.

"We're looking for Carly, too," he said. "When you find him, tell him to call his sister. She's worried about him."

"Nigel," I said, but he was walking the deputy to the door.

I went into the bedroom and traded my heeled shoes for a pair of boots. I slipped a denim jacket over my sweater and walked back into the kitchen. Nigel stared morosely at his plate and sipped occasionally from his coffee cup.

"I think we'd better find Carly," I said.

"Why? He'll show up in the

morning. He's just found him a lady somewhere."

"You didn't think so before, did you? Maybe I should call your place again? Did you leave him a key?"

"No. I thought he was hiding out from Michaels. I didn't think he'd be needing one."

"There's got to be someplace we can look." I'm stubborn. Carly says it's one of my more endearing qualities. I'm not sure how he means that.

"I think you ought to rest. If he hasn't shown up by morning, we'll look. He's all right. What about that blonde at Bogart's place? Linda. Maybe he's with her."

"Linda? One of Bo's waitresses at The Byron, or one of his night girls?"

"Waitress, of course. I don't imagine your brother has to pay for his favors. Come here. I messed up dinner, but we can repair the evening, I think." He stood up and pulled me against his lean, hard body. His kisses tasted bitter and dry like fear.

I squinted at the clock beside my bed. Twelve ten. I slipped out from under the covers, careful not to expose Nigel's bare skin to the chill air in the room, and pulled on the old chenille robe that hung on the bathroom door.

I sat in the rocking chair

where I did my best thinking and listened to Nigel's ragged breathing. Rumor had it that he wasn't the best lawyer an oil man could get for his troubles. But who else would take on Carly? The phone shrilled beside me.

"They have him." Charity was hysterical again. "Carly's murdered someone and the police have him."

"Calm down. Carly didn't kill anyone. Where is he?"

Her voice seemed far away. "Here. The county jail. Sulpula."

"We'll be there in thirty minutes."

“Why didn't you call me?" Charity glared at me.

"They wouldn't let me call anyone. They say I killed Michaels."

"You didn't call anyone? Then how did . . . ?"

"Did you?" Nigel interrupted.

"Come on, Nigel. Carly wouldn't kill anyone." I was convinced, but Nigel looked at Carly stubbornly and Charity had that disapproving look on her face.

We were in a small room furnished only with a card table and folding chairs. Charity sat near Carly.

"Did you?" Nigel repeated.

"What will I tell Jordan?"
Charity waived

"Of course I didn't. Why would I kill him? For that worthless piece of paper?"

"Worthless?" My forgotten piece of news. "You don't know? The well's a gusher. It blew out while I was there."

Carly looked as glum as ever. "So what? Michaels is dead now. What chance do I have of proving he coerced me into signing? My quarter will go to Michaels' mom, or to one of his ex-wives."

"No, I told you that paper is no good. Don't go worrying about that. Right now we need to get you out of here." Nigel's tone was all business. "Any chance you can tell us where you ran off to today?"

"Sure. I drove into Bristow, to The Byron, to get some clean clothes. Then I went to the coffee shop. It was time for Linda to get off work, so I took her home."

Charity just pursed her pentecostal lips. Poor Carly. If they didn't send him up, she'd kill him.

"Did you tell the sheriff where you were? Suppose we talk to this girl. Would she verify your alibi?"

"Don't know. Her husband gets pretty rough sometimes."

"Her husband? Carly, don't you have enough troubles?"

"Let's see about bail," Nigel said gruffly.

That's when it struck me.

"You went to the well site, Nigel. How did you know where?"

Nigel started guiltily. "Michaels showed me. He tried to give me a piece of the well to pay off an overdue fee."

"Did you take it?"

"It seemed like a good deal. The geologist recommended it."

It was time to write Nigel out of my story. One oil speculator in the family is too many.

"Did you kill Michaels?"

"Don't be silly."

"Carly, did Michaels have a piece of the well? I thought he was drilling for money, not royalties."

"He had my piece. He didn't want in until he hit the Viola. Greedy ba—"

"Why don't you tell them where else you went this afternoon?" Charity broke in. The vindictiveness in her voice hit me in the face.

"Wait a minute. Nigel, did you know Michaels was paying you off with Carly's quarter?"

He pulled his thick lips into a sulk. "Of course not. Now why don't you let Carly tell us where he went after he left Linda's."

The conflict of interest in the room was thick enough to spread.

"Okay, Carly. Where did you

and Linda go this afternoon?"

He looked up innocently, holding his bandaged hand with his good one. "We didn't go anywhere. I took her home. I was there maybe an hour when she got a phone call, I guess from her husband, and she said I had to leave."

"What time?"

"She gets off work at three."

"What time was Michaels . . . uh, what time did he . . ."

Nigel broke in. "Then where did you go?"

"Look, if we know what time . . ."

Nigel glared.

"I went out to the well site," Carly said finally. "I could see where it blew out, but it was all capped off when I got there."

"That was a particularly stupid thing to do, Carly." I regretted saying it as soon as I saw the look of vindication on Charity's face.

"Nobody saw me," Carly protested.

"Someone did. How else could they hold you?"

Charity shuffled her feet, and Nigel cleared his throat. The guard outside stuck his head in to say time.

"What about bail?" Nigel said as they led Carly away.

"Let's save our money." Who was I kidding? I had none. "If we find Linda and get her to alibi him, we won't need it."

"It's getting late."

"Yeah. We'll find her in the morning. Bet Charity knows where she is. She knows everything else that's going on. And Carly'll be safe here tonight. I'm going to get some sleep."

"Your place or mine?"

"Both. You can sleep in your bed, and I'll sleep in mine. I'll see you in the morning."

"I have court in the morning."

"Meet me here when you get out. Noon?"

He looked unhappy as he walked away. I didn't feel so happy myself. And here was Charity coming toward me. I raced toward the door, remembering that Nigel and I had driven over together, and watched him drive away alone. Thirty miles from home and Charity's my only ride. There is no justice.

Charity let me off in front of my house with poor grace, not missing a chance to remark on the absence of my car and the presence of Nigel's Jeep. As soon as she drove away I let myself in, made a pot of coffee, and sat in my thinking chair.

Who were my suspects? Coxson the geologist and Nigel. What was Coxson's motive? Nigel's? Could he keep Carly's quarter now that Michaels was

dead? And what about Charity? What was her part in all this? Could she kill someone just to frame Carly?

And why was Carly in jail? Of all the possible suspects, what did they have on which to hold him? And who was this Linda, and how did she figure? The old reliable chill hit me.

For whoever killed Michaels, Carly's alibi would be an obstacle. I picked up the phone and hoped I wasn't too late.

"Bogart? Angel Ride. Did I wake you?"

"Angel. What time is it? You want to come over for drinks?"

"No, Bogart. You have a girl named Linda working for you at the coffee shop. Tell me where I can find her."

"Ah, Angel. I can't tell you where my girls live. Now, if you were working for me . . ."

"I have a job, Bo. This is important. They're holding Carly."

"I heard."

"Yeah, well, she's his alibi. Whoever killed Michaels may go after her next."

"Meet me here in ten minutes. I'll take you over."

I parked Nigel's Jeep in front of Bogart's rambling ranch style house and walked to his Lincoln. The car was running. No time would be wasted.

"Linda Osborne is the girl. Michaels roughed her up a couple of times. He roughed

up a couple of my girls."

"She's one of your night girls? Carly said she was married."

"She tells her boyfriends that."

We pulled into the drive of a small brick house identical to a dozen brick houses on either side of the street.

"What are you doing with Nigel's Jeep?" Bogart asked as we walked up to the front door.

"Just borrowing it. He's Carly's lawyer."

"Then we'd better get him an alibi."

Bogart didn't knock. "Linda," he called softly. A lamp went on in the living room. She sat on the flowered sofa hugging an afghan about her. Despite the bruises, I recognized her as the honey blonde from The Byron. "So Michaels paid you a call before he bought it."

"Hi, Bo. You must be Angel. Carly's told me all about you. It's him, isn't it? Is he all right?"

"No. He's in jail."

"Then he's alive?"

"Michaels did this to you?" I looked from her to Bogart. The tears in Bo's eyes surprised me.

"Yes. Carly called this evening. When I told him, he went after him."

"Oh. When? When did Michaels do this?" The bruises were bright blue, fresh. "You been to a doctor?"

"No. He said he'd kill me."

"Well, he can't now. Didn't

you think he might kill Carly?"

She looked suddenly wary, and I heard the sound of footsteps on the concrete porch outside. Wouldn't do any good to hide. Whoever it was would recognize the Lincoln. Right. I dived for the hallway. Bogart stood still in the doorway between living room and kitchen.

"Well, look who's here. Your pimp." Georgie Coxson teetered in the doorway. "You're not welcome, Mr. Bogart."

"And you're drunk, Mr. Coxson."

Georgie turned a leer on Linda. "I don't suppose you bothered to tell him." He looked back to Bogart. "She's mine now. She's no longer your property. You can't protect her from maulers, so you lose your right to her."

He gestured roughly for Linda to get up. She stood, and as the afghan dropped from her shoulders he grabbed her arm. With his free hand he shoved back his jacket and pulled a gun from the waistband of his trousers.

"Okay, Bogart, get out of here."

Bogart didn't move. "You kill Michaels?"

Linda looked straight at me and I waited for her to talk, for Coxson to turn the gun on me.

"Somebody had to."

"Georgie!"

"You think this pimp is going

to tattle? He's got too much to hide, himself."

"Put the gun down, kid. You can have her, if that's what *she* wants. I don't force my girls to work for me. Now, if she doesn't want to go with you . . ."

While Bogart had Coxson's attention, I slipped back into the dark of the hall. Coxson was right. Not much chance Bo would testify. I thought about that as I found a window that opened. I wriggled through and dropped into the dirt below.

Coxson's Blazer was parked in the street, one front wheel upon the curb. A buzzer squealed and an empty bottle clattered against the pavement when I opened the door. Keys dangled in the ignition.

My finger on the hinge button stopped the buzzing while I slid the keys into my jacket pocket. I closed the door gently, then walked up the steps to the front door of the house.

I listened to the voices beyond the door, waiting, then knocked loudly. Sudden silence inside. I don't know who I expected to answer. Linda opened the door.

"Duck, Bogart," I yelled, and grabbed Linda's arm. "Come with me. Let's get out of here."

I pulled her across the porch to the steps, but she jerked away from me.

"No, Georgie," she screamed

and ran back through the door. "Don't shoot. Once is enough."

"But I'm not..." He sputtered and a look of comprehension, instant sobriety, spread across his face as she grabbed the gun and fired. The shot went wild. I heard Bogart fall.

For a minute, maybe two, I couldn't move. Georgie sobbed against Linda's legs. Linda stared at nothing.

"Don't set me up," Coxson moaned. "I love you. I wouldn't tell. Didn't I get rid of the body for you?"

Light burst from the big windows of the house next door, and Bogart called me to my senses. "Angel, where the hell are you?"

Bogart lay in a shaft of light from the kitchen. Blood pooled around his shoulder, but he wasn't going to die. I could tell by the angry look on his face. A tea towel presented itself, and I pressed it against his shoulder.

"Call an ambulance," he growled.

The sounds of a siren came closer.

"One of the neighbors did, I think. An ambulance or the police."

When I said police, Linda shook herself and pulled the gun up at me in a feeble motion, but she didn't move as I walked to her and took it away.

"Why?"

"He hurt me. And he'd kept on hurting me."

"But why let Carly take the blame?"

She echoed Georgie. "Somebody had to."

The police didn't knock before they walked in. The younger one radioed for an ambulance. Weariness washed over me. Carly could spend the rest of the night where he was. I needed sleep. No deal. Everyone on the Bristow force wanted a signed statement.

Winter was full blown. In my car, waiting for the heater to warm me, I hugged my mink closer around my uniformed body and considered the appetizing fact that Bogart didn't make his waitresses wear uniforms. The car was just beginning to warm as I pulled into my drive. Carly was waiting for me.

"Hi, sis."

His grin gave him away.

"Okay, Carly, what's up?"

"First check from Pipe Line, Inc."

"How much?"

"My quarter was just over thirty-four thousand. Don't know how long production will hold, though."

"Come inside. It's cold out here."

The house was warm, and I hung the jacket in the hall closet. "I've never been paid back so quickly," I said.

He looked at his shoes. The same old scruffs. No new eel-skins. "I've only got a thousand for you."

"Aw, come on, Carly."

"Pipe Line sent the check to my old address and Charity deposited it. I told her you got the money for me."

"What did she say?"

He looked up monkeyishly. "She said, 'That was a particularly stupid thing for her to do.' She'd only give me a thousand."

I looked at the check. Signed by Charity. I'd have to cash it quick before she stopped payment.

"I got it straightened out. Went to see Karma at the Pipe Line office. Signed a change of address affidavit. The next check'll come here."

Thirty days. I could wait.

"Got a deal for you when you get your money back."

"I've got to pay it back myself. Remember?"

"Cut it out, sis. I know where the money came from."

"Yeah. What do you have in mind?"

"A really good drill site in Garfield County. Georgie Coxson says he wants in if I can get the lease."

"Coxson? How's his accessory case coming? Poor boob."

"He'll get out. He's got the money from his quarter. Got a good lawyer with his money. Got Linda one, too."

"Who's the lawyer?"

"Some guy from Tulsa."

"Not Nigel, then?"

"No, not Nigel."

"Poor Nigel. How much did Michaels owe him? He's the only one gonna miss the bastard. He get anything?"

"A little chump money. He did get me my quarter back."

"Chump money. Like me?"

"Come on, sis. Don't I always come through?"

"Sure you do, Carly. Sure you do."

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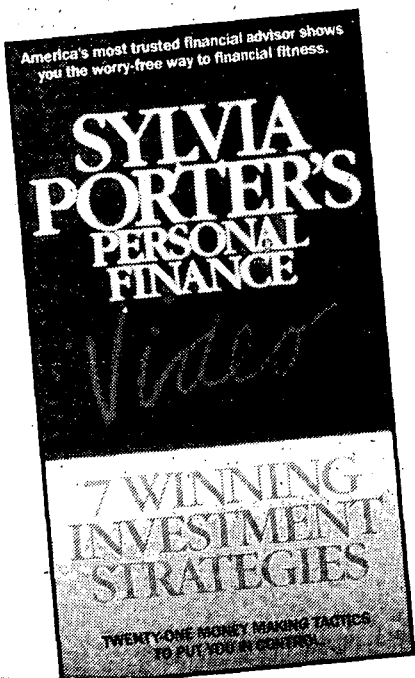
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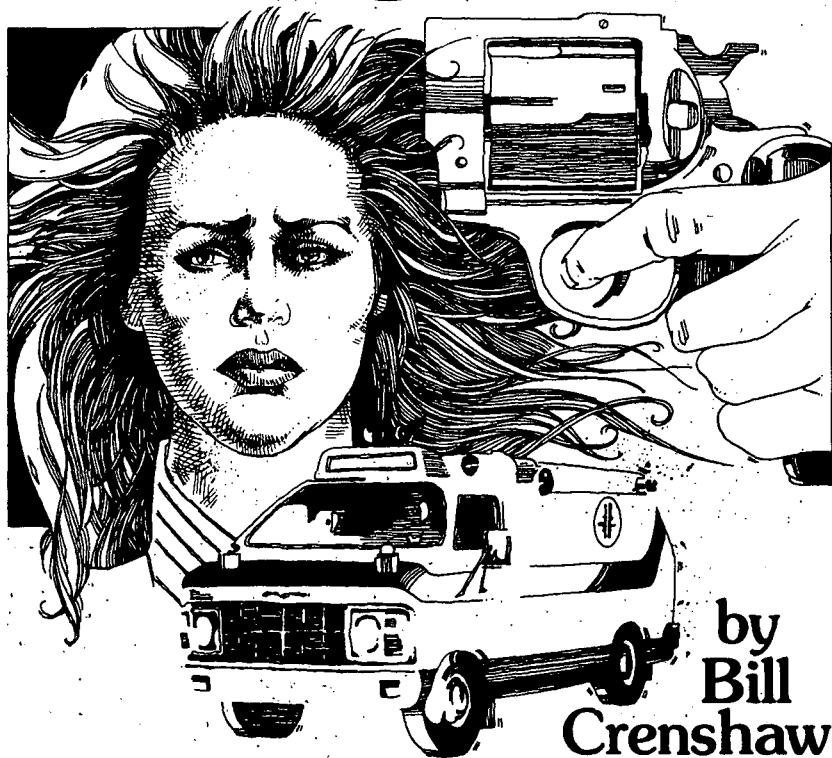
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EO

FICTION

Right People, Right Places



by
Bill
Crenshaw

Angelica Jones pulled the ambulance through the emergency entrance and parked just beyond the emergency room doors, out of the way in case another unit came in hot. She squeezed the steering wheel with both hands and

pushed back hard, holding her breath, stretching her shoulders and spine, exhaling. She was tired.

The shift wasn't even half over and had been one bad call after another—a stabbing, a broken leg, a cardiac arrest,

two wrecks, a heat stroke, an acute abdomen. That was a lot, even for the city in the summertime, and she'd been in the back of the unit for most of it and the ride in the back, no matter how smooth it was up front, was rough. She'd been bounced and slung around all day. She was ready for something slow and peaceful, no Code 3's, no broken bones, no blood. And now, finally, she had it, a routine transport from County Memorial across town to a private clinic. A milk run.

About time, she thought, lifting the mike from the radio mounted on the panel between the front seats. She thumbed the transmit button and told Central Dispatch that Unit 7 was 10-23 at County ER, waiting for Central's "10-4, Unit 7" before sliding out into the early evening heat.

Bobby Munroe had already pulled out the stretcher and was waiting for her behind the ambulance. He looked tired, too. He should, Angelica thought. Driving wasn't much better than being in the back. You had to fight the traffic, never knowing what the drivers in front of you would do when they finally saw your lights or heard your siren. Even driving a quiet shift was tense, and this had been a rough shift despite what she'd said when Bobby had asked her if things

were always like this. "Sometimes," she'd answered, and smiled.

Was she still testing him by saying that, she wondered? His performance had been . . . satisfactory. Oh, he knew his stuff, no doubt about that, but a partner was more than good test scores.

Bobby was too stiff, she thought, too slow to adjust. He kept looking for textbook cases, but you didn't get the textbook on the street. Each one was new, each different from what you'd seen before or what you expected. Bobby did well enough when she said, "Get the traction splint," or, "Use the scoop stretcher instead of the backboard," but . . . well, a partner was the person by your side, or behind the wheel, or in the back with a patient. He had to be able to improvise, to adapt, to be flexible. He had to have confidence.

You had to have confidence in him.

Maybe she was being too harsh. Maybe she should have driven the last car wreck and the broken leg at least, given Bobby some time in the back, time with the patient. Maybe she should *show* more confidence in him. She had been green once. She had to remember that. He'd get more flexible with experience.

But experience would have to

come fast. He was running out of time. She'd have to give the shift supervisor her report in three days, after one more twenty-four-hour shift. She wasn't sure she wanted him as a partner.

The ER doors slid open automatically as Bobby pulled the stretcher into the hospital, Angelica guiding the rear. The heads of the ER nurses bobbed up to see if anything was hopping, saw the empty stretcher, dropped back to gossip and charts and trading dirty jokes with the doctors.

Angelica and Bobby moved the stretcher through the ER, around a couple of corners, down a rubbery-tiled corridor past radiology and nuclear medicine, past physical therapy, past the bloodwork lab, all the way down the hall to the service elevator, up to the fifth floor, past the Five West nursing station with a wave, receiving another blank look, the nurse bored or burned out, one.

Room 5501 was all the way down the wing, and Angelica kept her eyes straight in front of her, willing tunnel vision so she wouldn't see into the hospital rooms, wouldn't meet the eyes of the patients raised toward the movement in the hall.

She knew she'd make a lousy nurse. She hated hospitals.

They reached the room. WYNNFIELD, D. said the card in

the name slot on the door. Angelica checked her chart. Right name. She knocked softly and pushed the door open.

Must be important, she thought. Crowded into the room with the patient were a doctor, a nurse, a big orderly, and a little man in a business suit. Angelica addressed the doctor. "Transport to Spencer Clinic?"

"That's right," the nurse answered. She was in whites instead of hospital greens—a private nurse, then, which meant money. The doctor said that they'd all ride with the patient in the ambulance. A private attending physician. More money. Angelica looked at her chart again, made a connection with the name. "A Miss, uh, Dominique Wynnfield?" she asked casually.

"That's right," the nurse repeated, turning her eyes from Angelica to the patient. Dominique Wynnfield. Money indeed.

The patient was a white female, early twenties, face bandaged, arm and leg in cast, I.V. line running, apparently unconscious—looked like a car wreck.

"No seatbelt?" asked Bobby, the innocent question of a new EMT trying to connect the textbook with the world.

"Let's just go, okay?" the doctor said.

The tone he used with Bobby

irritated Angelica. "One of you will have to ride up front with me," she said. "And if you're on board," she said to the doctor, "the patient is your responsibility."

"Of course," the doctor snapped. The nurse called him Dr. Filbert. Angelica didn't think she liked him.

The patient stirred, moaned, her eyes flickered and opened wide for a moment, pupils dilated, then closed again. She looked scared, but Angelica doubted that she knew where she was or what was happening. Under medication, Angelica thought. "How is she?" she asked, trying to be friendly.

"That's my responsibility," Dr. Filbert snapped again. Angelica knew she didn't like him. She was glad that she was driving this call. Not only would it give Bobby some time in the back, which he needed, but it also meant that she wouldn't have to ride with the doctor. Not that she wished him on Bobby.

They made a little parade back down the halls, a parade that rated another bored glance or vacant nod as they passed nursing stations or orderlies or janitors or surgeons. It was getting dark when they rolled the stretcher into the parking lot. Another unit sat at the ER doors, engine running. To Angelica the exhaust smelled al-

most sweet. At least it was a sign of life.

They slid the stretcher into the ambulance and locked it down. The doctor bumped his head and swore as he climbed in. Angelica smiled. "I'll drive," she said to Bobby. He mouthed, "Thanks."

Once up front, she buckled her seatbelt and craned around to look through the door and check the back before starting. The doctor, Bobby, and the nurse sat on the squad bench on the curb side of the unit. The orderly sat facing the back in the jump seat on the street side, directly behind the patient's head. The little man in the business suit rode up front with her. "Everything secure?" she asked.

"Secure," Bobby said.

She pulled out, lifting the mike with her right hand, steering with her left. "Central, Unit 7 10-17 to Spencer," she said into the mike. The little man was suddenly upset, asking what 10-17 meant, snappish as the doctor. Angelica pointed to the 10-codes posted on the dash. "It means we're en route," she said. The man leaned over the list, trying to read as they rolled under street lights.

Why me? she thought, watching him out of the corner of her eye. He kept fidgeting, shifting his gaze, looking at the street, at her, into the back. He was

nervous. Being in ambulances sometimes did that to people. He made her nervous.

They stopped at a red light. The little man strained to see the street signs. "Corner of College and Alexander," he called to the back.

"It's time," said the doctor. He sounded irritated again, or anxious. "Turn right."

"It's left to the clinic," said Angelica, looking into the rear view mirror.

"Go *right*," said the little man. Angelica looked down and saw the pistol in his fist.

"Angie," called Bobby from the back, "the doctor has a gun on me."

Angelica's grip tightened on the wheel. "What is this?"

"You just drive, honey," said the little man. "We'll tell you what to do."

The light changed.

Angelica hesitated for a moment. There was traffic on the right. She couldn't cut across it. And they wouldn't shoot her, she couldn't believe they would. Not unless they were crazy.

She decided to push it a little. She turned left. The little man slapped at her hand. "We said *right*," he said in a high snarl.

Angelica snarled back. "I was in the left lane. If I'd gone right, I'd've gotten hit. That what you wanted?"

"You do what we say." He

poked the muzzle into her ribs. It hurt.

"Back off, Wade," said the doctor. "Listen up, driver. We're going to the airport. You get us there. No lights, no sirens, no fuss. A nice steady drive to the private terminals. Play games and you'll find out that we don't."

The little man started giggling. Oh, great, thought Angelica. A whacko. She'd picked up whackos before. She'd tried to talk one off a ledge once. You never knew what a whacko would do. They were in trouble.

"You okay, Bobby?" she called.

"Okay," he answered.

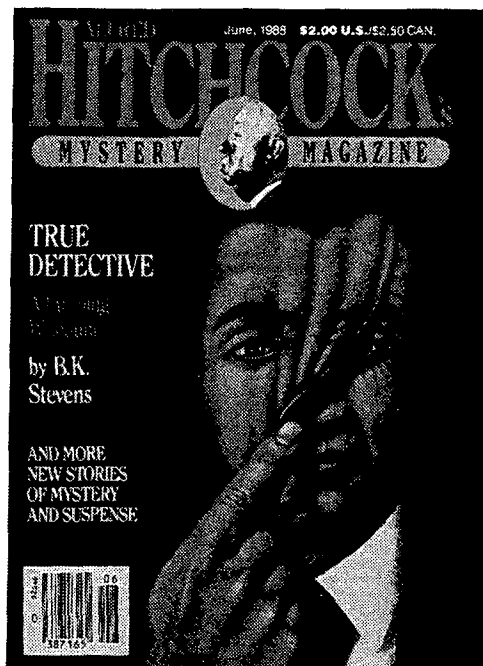
"Shut up," said the little man.

"You shut up," she snapped back. She felt the gun hit her ribs again. "That's right, shoot me when we're doing forty in traffic. Idiot."

"Wade!" The doctor's voice was harsh. The gun pulled back from her ribs. "Young woman," the voice continued, "Wade will not shoot you, but I *will* shoot your partner if you don't cooperate. Clear?"

"Clear," said Angelica. God, she thought. All these people were nuts. They were in big trouble.

She heard a moan, realized it was the patient. "She's coming around," said the doctor. "You said she'd stay out. Do something." His voice quivered.



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In the rear view mirror, Angelica could see his free hand flapping and the nurse filling a hypodermic syringe.

"Don't," the patient was saying. "Who?" But the nurse gave the injection and the girl was quiet again.

"You're not Filbert," said Angelica. "You're not even a doctor."

The doctor laughed. "I guess that means the patient is your responsibility." He laughed again.

Angelica locked eyes on the street. She had to think. This was nuts, this was just nuts. She had to do something. The little man wouldn't shoot her, not when she was driving, not if the doctor told him not to. She could take his gun. She could just reach out, wrap her fingers around the barrel, and lift the pistol out of his hand. What could he do?

What would she do? If she got the gun, would she shoot him? She'd have to, wouldn't she, otherwise he'd take it back. Could she? She didn't know. Could she while driving? Could she? *Think, think!* she screamed in her mind. Could she? And if she could, then what? Shoot the doctor? Would the doctor shoot Bobby? Would she have to shoot all of them? Could she?

And what if the little man would shoot her? What if she

reached out and wrapped her fingers around the barrel and he pulled the trigger? Then what?

No good. It wouldn't work. She needed something else.

The streets were full of light and people in cars. She drove as slowly as she dared, buying time.

Who were these people? What did they want? They had to see that they couldn't get away with this, with hijacking an ambulance. What were they doing?

"Dominique Wynnfield," said Bobby, as if reading her mind. "You're kidnapping Dominique Wynnfield."

So that's it, thought Angelica. Ransom. Big ransom. And she remembered about Filbert, old man Wynnfield's personal physician, had his own rich-rich practice, never got his hands dirty in public medicine or public hospitals.

"Where's Filbert?" she said.

The little man giggled. "No more housecalls."

They were in really big trouble.

Think, Angie, Angelica thought viciously. Airport. Private terminal. Private airplane waiting, engines warm and running, ready to go. You kidnap the rich man's daughter. Rich man probably waiting at clinic now. Somebody inside

knew in advance. Somebody inside, airplane waiting, four people on board ambulance, plus victim, plus EMT's. What do you do with the EMT's? Take them with you? Or just kill them? Let them join Filbert. Filbert's dead, what's a couple of EMT's? They're going to kill us when we get there, she thought.

It was crazy. It didn't make any sense. They couldn't just do this and have it work.

"What makes you think you'll get away with this?" she said.

"Right people, right places," said the little man.

"Just drive," the doctor shouted.

She couldn't just drive. She had to do something. If she could signal Central somehow, maybe they could . . . what? Set up a roadblock. Have the police block an intersection or the airport exit ramp or the gate to the private field. She'd round a curve or a corner and there'd be two black and whites across the road, blue lights flashing, lined with cops sighting down shotguns and a captain with a bullhorn . . .

. . . It wouldn't help. She'd brake the unit, the captain would order everybody out, and the little man would put the pistol to her head. If they stopped for a roadblock, she'd just be a hostage. An expendable hos-

tage. So would Bobby. The kidnappers had already killed Filbert; killing her wouldn't cost them any more.

But if they got to the plane, they'd kill her for sure, she was certain of it. She could identify them.

Was it better to take a chance as a hostage or take a chance at the plane?

Traffic was beginning to thin. Hostage.

She reached for the mike. The little man crashed the gun down on her hand.

"I've got to call in," she said, her hand to her mouth, flexing her fingers. She didn't think anything was broken. "If I don't call in . . ."

The little man twisted the mike off its cord. "Don't be stupid."

She turned her face back to the street and tried to drive, tried to think.

Maybe she could stall the ambulance at an intersection. The little man wouldn't know about the battery cut-off switch under the left side of her seat. She could stall the unit and hit the switch as she jumped out, and she'd run back along the side of the unit and dodge through traffic and be out of their sight behind cars before they could shoot, and they'd never start the unit because they wouldn't know about the switch and

they'd just sit there until . . .

They stopped at a red light.
It was now or never.

*Open the door, hit the switch,
run.*

No. She couldn't do it. That would make Bobby the hostage, and the girl. She sagged in her seat.

In her left side mirror she could see a patrol car coming up from behind, switching into the turn lane, pulling up alongside them, stopping. She could jump out now and run now and they'd see the little man and his gun and they'd get him . . . and Bobby would be left at gunpoint still. The cops were right next to her. She didn't dare even to look at them.

She heard a horn blowing. She heard a voice calling her name. She looked over. It was Brad, a patrolman she dated now and then. He was leaning out of his window, shouting at her. She gave a little wave.

"Talk to him," hissed the little man.

She rolled down her window. *Oh, please help me*, she thought. *Oh, Brad, please.*

Brad pointed to his watch. "Coffee?"

"Can't," she said, jerking a thumb toward the back. "Patient on board."

Brad nodded. "Another time," he called. "Catch you later." She saw his partner give Brad

a playful shove, laughing. She tried to smile as they drove away.

"Very good," said the doctor.

The turnoff for the airport was less than a mile away.

She was running out of time.

She'd have to wreck the unit. There was nothing else to do. She'd have to just plow into a telephone pole or the line of parked cars and jump and run. Bobby would run then, he'd see what she was doing, he'd have a chance, too. And the girl? What could these people do with the girl if they couldn't move her? She'd be a hostage, but she already was anyway and if they drove her to the airport she had no chance. No choice, then, wreck the unit while you're still on the street because once you turn off to the airport, it's nothing but a long, dark road to the terminal.

That's where they'll do it, Angelica thought. On that long, dark road, and then they'll just drive the ambulance to the waiting plane themselves. Less messy.

This was it, then, find the place to wreck, the thing to hit, and do it. She'd have to try to control impact, make it hard enough to hurt but give them a chance to get out and away but not so hard as to injure her or Bobby. She was strapped in. She'd be fine. But Bobby was on

the squad bench, unbuckled. He'd be loose. And what if she couldn't control the wreck? What if something went wrong. Bobby might be killed. She might be killed. What if the fuel tank ruptured? What if the big oxygen bottle broke loose? She'd read about a unit that caught fire with a leaking O₂ tank on board. Three thousand liters of pure oxygen. Steel had melted.

No choice. She had to take the chance.

She could see the first exit to the airport coming up.

She picked her spot, a big green dumpster. *Hit it on that side, she thought. Put the little man through the windshield.*

In her mind she saw the fire, saw flesh burning off bone.

She drove past the dumpster.

She drove past the first exit. The little man hit her in the face. He was shrieking something at her. So was the doctor. He said he'd kill Bobby if she pulled anything else.

She wanted help. She searched the mirror desperately for a patrol car. She'd take a chance for help, now, wished she had before.

Help me, Brad.

Nothing in the mirror.

There would be no help. It was up to her.

The little man pushed the gun in her ribs as the second exit came up. She slowed and

made the turn onto the long, dark road to the terminal. The little man craned around back as if looking for a signal. They could shoot her here and drive the rest of the way themselves. She was certain they were going to do it.

Then she had an idea, a desperate idea, but it all depended on Bobby, and if he didn't follow her lead, if he went by the book for one second, if he hesitated, asked one question, it was through. But she had no choice.

Slowly she started accelerating the ambulance.

Above her head on the panel of indicators and switches was a row of three lights, one red, one amber, one green. If the patient suddenly went bad, the EMT in the back could punch a switch that would light the red lamp, Code 3, and the driver could speed up. The lights were required by law. Angelica had never seen them used. She was going to use them now, but not in the way the law had intended.

"Bobby!" she yelled, the horror in her voice real as she tapped the panel of lights above her head. "I got no green light. Something's wrong with the big O₂ tank. Check it fast."

"Right," said Bobby, rising from the squad bench.

Filbert jerked him back down. "You stay!"

Angelica yelled at him. "If that tank's leaking we're gonna have a fire. You ever seen a fire fed by pure oxygen? You want to be in one? He's got to check that tank. Get your man out of the jump seat and let Bobby secure that tank."

Filbert's hand started flapping. He hesitated. "Okay, do it."

In the mirror Angelica watched Bobby grab the overhead bar and swing off the squad bench and help the orderly take his place. Then Bobby dropped into the jump seat.

"Secure?" shouted Angelica.

"Secure," Bobby answered.

She was strapped in, the patient was strapped down, Bobby was in the jump seat, but the rest of them were loose and ready to fly. She stomped on the brake with both feet, and the ambulance tried to stand on its nose.

The little man made a resounding impact with the dash and before he had stopped bouncing Angelica had snatched the heavy black flashlight from its seat mount and brought it down on the back of his head, steering the ambulance to a

stop with her left hand. She popped her seatbelt and dropped to the floor, feeling for the gun, found it, turned to the back, but it was all right. The sudden stop had cleared the squad bench. The doctor, the orderly, and the nurse had shot right off the end and were now jammed and tangled between the squad bench and the jump kit cabinet and the curbside door. The orderly looked unconscious. Someone was bleeding. The doctor was moaning, clutching an obviously broken arm. His gun was in Bobby's hand.

"Okay?" she asked.

Bobby nodded. "Okay," he said. "Good job."

"Yeah, well," said Angelica. "Like the man said, partner, the right people in the right places."

They smiled at each other.

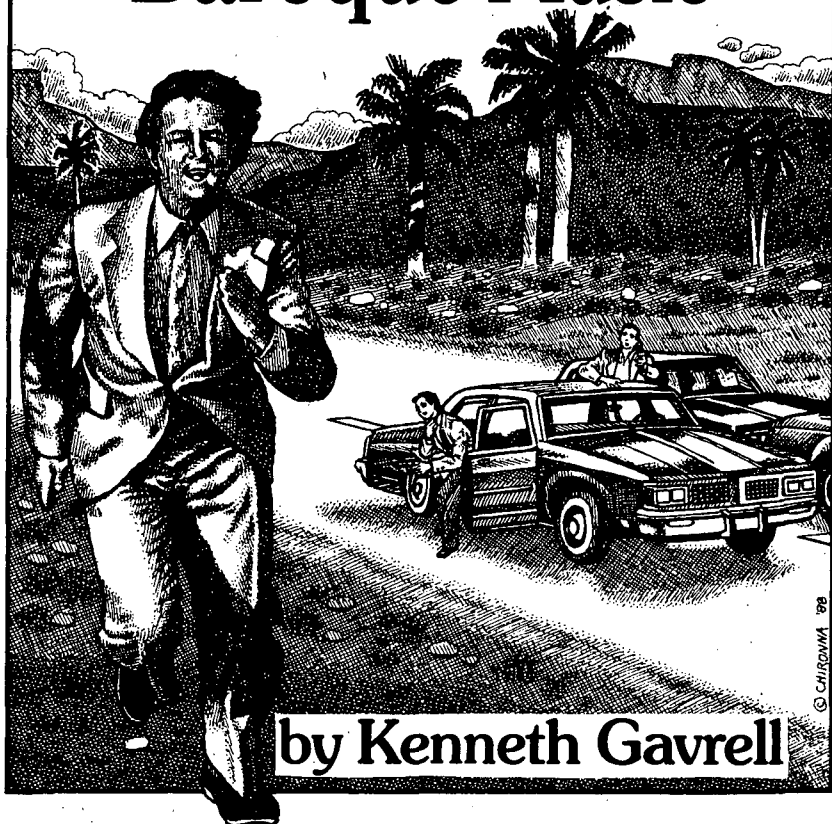
Up front the little man moaned. Angelica suppressed the urge to give him another whack with the flashlight.

"You know what I hate?" she said. "We've got an ambulance full of people who need emergency medical care."

"Figures," said Bobby. "It's been that kind of shift."

FICTION

Plants Like Baroque Music



by Kenneth Gavrell

The annual madness had hit the island. Christmas. A month of parties, *parrandas*, cramped shopping malls, snarled traffic, and manic-depressive behavior. You

sometimes felt that Puerto Rico spent eleven months of the year working up energy for *las Navidades*.

It was Monday evening and I was sitting in my living room

watching the new computer-colored version of *The Sea Hawk*. Errol Flynn looked young and pink and I felt old and blue. I like black and white movies. For me they represent a dead world where a lot of things seemed to be black and white, like sex and love and values and certain ideals. That world never really existed, but I prefer to imagine it did.

A string of commercials came on, and I got up to make myself another drink. I probably drank too much. I didn't get enough exercise, and my dentist was worried about my gums receding. I was getting old. They'd find me dead of a heart attack on the floor of my living room a week after the fact.

I wasn't in the best of moods.

The phone rang and I reached for it gratefully and heard a voice I hadn't heard in a year or more: Saúl Castaño, a guy I used to go to the race track with on occasion. He didn't sound as cheerful as he'd used to.

"It's been a long time," I said.

"I've been pretty busy," Saúl said.

"Do you still go to the track?"

"Not much. Look, I'd like to see you, Carlos."

"Sure. When? About anything in particular?"

"I think I've got a problem. Maybe you can help me solve it."

"You *think* you've got a problem? What kind of problem?"

"I don't want to talk about it on the phone. Can you come over?"

"You mean right now?"

"Yes."

"Do you still live in the same place?"

"Yes," he said. "Apartment 412."

"All right. I should be about half an hour."

I changed into street clothes, finished off my rum on the rocks, and went down to my car. Normally it would be a twenty-five minute drive to Saúl's condominium on the outskirts of Bayamon, but traffic was light that evening and I made it in twenty. The building was tall, rectangular, gun-metal grey, and stood with its back to a wooded karst hill. It looked like a tombstone, or the monolith in the movie *2001*. I searched for 412 on the dimly lit intercom panel beside the pedestrian entrance gate and pressed the button. There was no response. I buzzed it twice more with the same result. Then I saw a car entering the parking area beside the building through an electric gate. I scooted through behind it just before the gate clanged shut.

The small lobby, done in elegant looking yellow marble, had two elevators and an open-

air staircase that climbed the back of the building. I took a waiting elevator up to the fourth floor.

Saúl's apartment was just down from the elevators next to the open-air stairway. I leaned on his doorbell and then banged fruitlessly on the door. By now I was worried. The door had three visible locks, but I tried the knob anyway. It opened.

Saúl Castaño lay face down on the floor next to the telephone table. There was a bloodstain on the back of his shirt the size of a saucer. I bent down to examine him more closely and saw the two perforations in his shirt just about where the heart would be. When I checked for his pulse, I didn't find any.

It looked as though whoever had shot him had done so just after he'd hung up from calling me. Whoever it was had also searched the room, judging from the mess it was in. I noticed that on a three by three inch pad next to the telephone there was a number jotted; it was my home phone number.

I wandered into the kitchen, the bedroom, the bathroom; in all of them the lights were on. All of them had been searched. I pulled open the floor-to-ceiling beige drapes that lined one side of the living room and encountered sliding glass doors

that opened on a comfortable-sized balcony with green outdoor carpeting. The glass doors were about two feet ajar. I walked onto the balcony and found three white garden chairs, a matching table, and a view of the wooded hillside behind the condominium.

A few minutes later I was dialing the phone number of the Homicide Division in Hato Rey. Then I lit a cigarette and filled my hollows with smoke.

They were there thirty minutes later. The man in charge was Lieutenant Moisés Romero, a detective I knew quite well. He talked to me while the others took their photos and measurements and fingerprints. I respected Romero, but at the best of times he wasn't all that *simpático*, and tonight, apparently, wasn't the best of times.

"What *exactly* did he say on the phone?" he asked rather irritably.

"That he had a problem—or thought he had a problem—and wanted to talk to me about it. But not over the telephone."

"He *thought* he had a problem. What kind of problem?"

"He wouldn't say."

"So you came right over."

"That's right."

"How did you get in?"

"The door was unlocked. I

guess whoever killed him didn't bother to lock it behind him."

"You didn't see anybody leaving the building?"

"No."

"Was he a good friend of yours?"

"Just an acquaintance. We used to go to the track once in a while or have a drink together."

"He was single, I take it."

"Divorced. About seven years ago. He has a kid, a girl of nine or ten."

Romero sat down on a brown rattan sofa and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He didn't offer me one. I lit one of my own.

"I hate this kind of murder," he said.

"What kind do you like?"

"Crimes of passion."

"They solve themselves," I said.

"Just how did Castaño sound on the phone?" Romero asked.

"Worried. In a big hurry to see me."

"It looks like he knew someone was after him."

"And after something else as well: the apartment was searched."

"Oh, I thought you did that," Romero said dryly.

Dry was, in fact, the perfect word for him: dry grey hair, dry parchment skin, a dry taste in clothes. He was getting older and looking forward to retiring

to a *finca* near Maunabo. He'd seen too much, and it had dried up his body fluids, especially the tears.

"If he was afraid for his life, he wouldn't have left the apartment door unlocked," Romero remarked.

"Right," I said.

"And he wouldn't have opened the door to his killer."

"I don't think Saúl even moved from the telephone after calling me," I said.

"So the killer was already in the apartment. How did he get in?"

I pointed to the balcony.

"It's four floors up," said Romero.

"Come outside a minute."

He reluctantly straightened his bony frame and followed me out to the balcony. I indicated a narrow ledge about three inches in depth that ran along the building's exterior a yard above our heads. Using it, a person could swing from the balcony rail to the rail of the open-air stairway about six feet away—or vice-versa. "It can be done without too much difficulty," I said, "by someone with guts. He wouldn't be seen because the apartment looks on the hillside."

Romero studied the distance skeptically. "That means the balcony doors were unlocked," he said.

"As I found them."

He lit another Winston off the one he'd consumed. "It's possible," he admitted.

We returned to the living room. The man with the camera was creating domestic lighting and the one with the chalk was telling dirty jokes.

"Well, this murder won't solve itself," I said. "What'll you do now?"

"Oh, we'll see if any of the neighbors saw anyone leaving the apartment. Then we'll follow the routine leads: ex-wife, employment, family, friends. And then we'll probably file it under 'Pending' until everyone's forgotten about it. Do you know where his ex-wife lives?"

"Not a clue, but her name's Zoraida and she still uses her married name, I think. Saúl worked at Masters Electronics, that huge place in Minillas. He was a computer engineer."

Romero pulled out a pad and jotted some notes.

"Was he a man for the ladies?" he asked me.

"I think he was."

"Who had he been going out with recently?"

"I hadn't seen him for over a year. I never met his family, either."

"I'm so glad I was in the office when you phoned," Romero said.

"They couldn't have sent a better man," I said.

"Do you have a gun on you?" he asked.

I spread my arms. "Not a one."

"You wouldn't have used that caliber anyway," Romero said disappointedly. "They look real small—maybe .22's."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Can I go now?"

"I'll keep in touch," he said.

"That's very kind of you."

"Try not to stumble into any more homicides," said Romero. "I'll need some time to do my Christmas shopping."

I wished him *Felices Navidades* as I strolled out the door.

This one wasn't my responsibility. Saúl Castaño had only been an acquaintance of mine, not a friend. And he had been a loner: no one would suffer—except maybe his daughter. I wasn't involved. I called up my girlfriend Raquel and asked her if she wanted company.

There was no call from Lieutenant Romero the next day, and I didn't call him. At seven in the evening, while I was waiting for a TV dinner to thaw in the oven, my phone rang; I picked it up expecting it to be Romero.

"Bannon speaking."

"Sr. Bannon, my name is Antonio Quiñones. I think I might have some information you

would be interested in."

The voice had a peculiar, whiny quality. He spoke Spanish with an accent that wasn't Puerto Rican.

"What sort of information?"

"About the death of Saúl Castaño. I understand you were a friend of his."

"How did you know about his death?"

"I read about it in the newspaper."

"Well, I repeat: what sort of information?"

"I'd prefer not to talk over the phone. Can we meet somewhere?"

I'd placed the accent: it was a Cuban.

"All right," I said. "There's a restaurant in Santurce called La Paloma Blanca—it's on Ponce de Leon."

"I know where it is," he said. "At what time?"

"In an hour."

"Good," he said. "I'll sit at the bar. I'll be wearing a tan suit and maroon tie."

"*Chévere*," I said and hung up.

He had one of the most irritating voices I'd ever heard: "wheedling" was the word, but somehow sinister at the same time. I took my .357 Magnum out of its drawer and checked it over. It was loaded with five rounds. I got a light jacket from the closet and dropped another

half dozen cartridges into the left side pocket. Then I strapped on the revolver and covered it with the loose-fitting jacket. By now the TV dinner was ready. I chewed dutifully on suspiciously bright green beans and sipped a Budweiser. Christ, I didn't like it.

At twenty of eight I left. As I was rounding the shrubbed corner of the building into the parking lot, a form separated itself from the tall dark plants against the wall to my left. I jumped. The muzzle of a silvery automatic gleamed in the light from the parking area. It was about four feet from me. It was aimed at my midsection.

"Over there," he motioned to the right with the automatic.

I moved to the right toward the lot exit. Just outside the exit, a big blue American car sat at the curb.

"Walk to the car and get in the back." I recognized the voice. It was the same I'd heard on the telephone.

As I neared the car I saw another gun trained on me by whoever was sitting in the driver's seat. These guys didn't take any chances. The back door was shoved open, and the two guns guided me in.

"Nice car," I said. I always try to sound flippant when I'm scared as a rabbit in a snake

pit.

The first guy was already pulling my .357 from its holster. He tossed it onto the front seat beside the driver. When they didn't find any more weaponry, the guy beside me nodded to the driver, who withdrew his gun from my nose and headed the car up the block. The one beside me covered me every second.

We were moving toward Avenida 65 de Infantería. In the better light, I could see them more clearly. The one in back was short and wiry. He seemed to be in his early thirties but his hair was completely grey. He had the face of a penguin, with unblinking small black eyes. They were eyes that didn't miss anything, eyes that didn't feel, eyes that might only light up when he pulled the trigger of a gun. Oh, I didn't care for this guy.

The one driving was massive—certainly over three hundred pounds. It was all soft fat. His face looked flat and broad and stupid, and his hair was wispy and sick-looking.

"Where does he buy his clothes?" I asked the smaller one.

He gave me a thin-lipped smile, if you could call it that. "Milk addiction," he said.

"What?"

"He drinks twenty-five quarts of milk a day. It's an addiction."

"I never heard of an addiction to milk."

We turned right, into the road to Trujillo Alto. This road crossed to Río Grande and climbed the hills beyond; it was the quickest way out of town. The direction was not comforting.

"Where are we going?"

"Someplace quiet where we can talk."

"We can talk right here."

"*Está bien.* You received a phone call from Saúl Castaño last night before he died."

"How do you know?"

"We know. Then you went to his apartment."

"You guys are very knowledgeable."

"Now, what we want to know is: what was your connection with Castaño?"

"He was just an acquaintance."

He jabbed the nickel-plated automatic into my ribs. "Don't test my patience," he hissed in his whiny Cuban voice. "What did Castaño tell you over the phone?"

"He said he had a problem. He wanted help."

"I don't believe you." He jabbed my ribs again. "Did he mention any names—or where you could find some names?"

"No, nothing like that," I said. I wanted to keep him talking. We were slowing down for

a stoplight. I thought these guys were going to kill me; and I had nothing to lose by trying to make a break for it.

"I don't know anything about any names," I said. "I suppose Saúl called me because I'm a private detective."

"He could be telling the truth," the monster in the front seat said. He also spoke with a Cuban accent.

We had stopped for the light. There were cars ahead of us and to our left. To our right, my side of the car, was a stretch of treed field and beyond that a depression with an arroyo. I had my hand on the door latch.

"Listen," I said, "I think we should—" and I kicked up hard with my left leg. The gun went off as I hit his arm, a bullet buzzing by my ear into the roof. I smashed at him with my fist and got him solidly in the Adam's apple. He doubled forward in pain, and I wrenched open the door and leaped out and onto the curb and into the field. The element of surprise did it. Fatso at the wheel didn't have a chance to do anything before I was among the trees. The other guy would still be gagging. I ran like a champion. I didn't stop until I was well past the arroyo and into the thicker woods, by which time the sounds from the road were faint.

I sat and listened to my own agonized breathing and the noise of the *coquís*. I guess I sat there quite a while; they didn't make any attempt to pursue me. Finally I got to my feet and worked my way through the woods parallel to the road, exiting much farther down. I didn't see the big blue Oldsmobile. About a quarter mile to my right, an Esso sign glowed against the trees. Retreating from sight of the road, I slogged through prickly bushes and dead branches and mud until I reached the gas station. I had to screw myself up to walk inside and telephone for a taxi.

My watch was edging nine thirty when I arrived at my apartment. It hadn't been as long as it seemed. I didn't see the big blue Oldsmobile. My nerves were still playing a dissonant acid rock, and I was also seething with anger. In time, enough Palo Viejo got me to sleep.

Almost getting myself shot had roused my curiosity in a way that Saúl Castaño's shooting had not been able to do. So I telephoned Homicide early the next morning and asked to talk to Lieutenant Romero. He wasn't in, and I left a message for him to call me at my office after ten. Then I got dressed

and drove down to the Condado.

Maria, my part-time secretary, had typed some reports for me to look over and sign. She offered me a sample of one of her culinary specialties, fudge brownies. I munched down two with a cup of her deadly coffee.

"You like them?" she called from her desk.

"With that kind of talent, I'm surprised some lucky guy hasn't snapped you up by now."

"It's not cooking most of these guys are after," Maria said.

"That's true," I agreed sadly. "They're not all appreciative domestic types like me."

"Hah!" she spluttered, almost losing her ever-present Doublemint gum. "That blonde who came in Monday had your nostrils flaring and your pupils dilated. I could hear your pulse from here."

"Well," I said, "maybe with regular exercise and a good nutritious breakfast, you too—"

She threw a box of paper clips at me. They scattered over the floor.

At eleven, Lieutenant Romero phoned. No small talk, just: "Well, Bannon?"

"I was wondering if you'd received the autopsy and ballistics reports on the Castaño case yet."

"Why are you interested?"

I told him about my evening drive with the two Cubans

"That's interesting," he said. "The shorter one might be our killer. He would have seen Castaño on the telephone while he was out on the balcony. He'd figure Castaño called the number on his pad—your number. Later, apparently, he—or they—waited outside, probably in a car, to see who arrived at the building. They must have access to a reverse phone directory. They saw you outside your office before they telephoned you."

"That's about the way I reconstruct it," I agreed.

Romero asked me to repeat my descriptions of the Cubans while he took notes. "We'll see if anybody knows them," he said. "Meanwhile, if I were you, I'd watch my ass."

"I'm touched by your concern."

He scowled audibly. "That nicked automatic he had—did it look like a .22?"

"It was pretty small caliber," I said. "It could have been. Was that the caliber they dug out of Saúl?"

"Twenty-two Shorts fired at close range. One entered the heart. As you know, .22 Shorts don't make much noise, but two of the neighbors heard the shots. They didn't see anyone leave the apartment, they claim."

"We talked to Castaño's ex-

wife. She can't think of any rea-

son why someone would want to shoot him. She hasn't talked to him in years—on Sundays he picks up the kid by honking his horn and drops her off later in front of the house. Castaño's parents took the news hard, but couldn't give us any leads either. The people where he works weren't helpful, except for the company manager. His name's Dávila, and he says he may be able to help us but he'll have to 'clear' it first."

"Clear it? Clear what?"

"I'm not sure. Anyway, I'm supposed to see him again this afternoon. I think he does know something."

"Do you mind if I poke around a little?" I asked.

"Be my guest," Romero said. "But don't go near Dávila. I don't want you botching this up."

"All right. What's Zoraida Castaño's address?"

He gave it to me—a small house in Urbanización Versalles. I thanked him and told him I'd let him know if I uncovered anything useful.

My Magnum was gone, but I still had my office gun: a Browning BDA .380. I strapped it on under a jacket and headed for the street door. Maria asked where I was off to.

"I've got a date with that ravishing blonde," I leered at her. "I should be back next Tuesday."

"You'll be dead before then," Maria said.

I hoped she wasn't right.

Zoraida Castaño was in fact a blonde, though I suspected a dyed one. I found her sitting in a yellow webbed chair on her tiny front terrace reading a gossip magazine. I'd never met her, although Saúl had often talked about her—usually with a congealed bitterness. She wouldn't open the gate of the iron grille enclosing her terrace until I'd thoroughly explained my presence and allowed her to study my P.I. license.

"I suppose it's all right," she said in Spanish as she reluctantly rotated the key in the massive padlock.

I guessed she must be about thirty-seven, but with her babyish face under the blonde curls and her long boyish body in a demure lace-trimmed summer dress, she seemed to be trying very hard to look sixteen. Even her voice sounded too young. She invited me to take a yellow chair and asked if I would like some lemonade. I accepted the chair and declined the lemonade.

"I've already talked to the police," she said.

"I know," I said, "but I would appreciate a few minutes of your time."

"Who hired you to investigate Saúl's death?" she asked.

"Well, actually no one. He was a friend of mine."

"Oh," she said expressionlessly.

"I understand you and Saúl didn't speak to each other after the divorce."

"No, we didn't."

"But he did visit your daughter regularly."

"He didn't visit her, he took her out on Sundays."

"She must be taking this pretty badly."

"Laura will get over it," she said almost matter-of-factly. "She's only ten."

If the woman had any emotions at all, she was doing a marvelous job of hiding them.

"I know that Saúl worked at the Masters Electronics complex in Minillas," I said. "What do they make there?"

"Oh, a little of everything: microchips, other computer components. Recently I read somewhere that they're involved in laser technology. I think they have some contracts with the Defense Department."

"Would you know exactly what Saúl was working on most recently?"

"No. Are you sure you wouldn't like some lemonade?"

I declined again. I asked her about the two Cubans who had taken me for a ride, describing each in detail.

"No, I'm sure I don't know them," she said. "What was

their connection with Saúl?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out."

We were suddenly interrupted by a high-pitched, plaintive "*Mami*" from inside the house.

"I'm out on the terrace, *mi vida*," Zoraida Castaño called. "*Vente*."

A moment later a little girl in bluejeans and a gingham blouse came trooping to the screen door. She pushed her nose flat against the screen and stared at me with big brown eyes.

"*Hola!*" I smiled. The child just stared unblinkingly.

"*Qué tu quieres, mi amor?* What do you want, my love?" asked her mother.

"*No puedo encontrar mi Barbie de pelo moreno*. I can't find my brown-haired Barbie," the child said almost inaudibly.

"I'll be in in a minute," said her mother. "I'll help you find it."

"Are you a policeman?" the girl asked me very quietly.

"No," I said. "I was a friend of your father."

"Oh," she said. She continued to stare and I turned back to her mother: "The police think Saúl's death may have had some connection with his work."

"I wouldn't know," Zoraida Castaño said. "But Saúl's work was very important to him—I will give him that. Do you know,

we were married for four years and Saúl never realized that I hated to cook. In fact, I know very little about cooking. Every afternoon I would order a full meal from a catering service. They'd bring it about four thirty and I'd change it to my own pots and pans and put it on the stove. When Saúl got in at six, I would warm it up and serve it. He thought I was a wonderful cook. He never suspected a thing."

"That's quite a story," I said. "Didn't he ever come home unexpectedly early?"

"No. And he never missed a day of work in those four years. Saúl was good at his job and he loved it. He brought it home with him. Towards the end, he had something else occupying his mind as well."

I turned to see if Laura was still watching us, but she was gone.

"So it started before the divorce," I said.

"So I'm told. You know, I don't think I feel anything. Isn't that funny? Once I was sure I couldn't live without him, and now he's dead—murdered—and I don't feel a thing."

"It's understandable," I said.

"We had absolutely nothing in common," she continued. She was talking to herself now, not to me. "Saúl liked electronics and horseracing and fooling with cars and later fooling with

women. I'm the sort who likes to visit Disney World and listen to what he called 'musack.' He thought I was a bore, if not an idiot."

"How do you support yourself now?" I asked.

"Oh, I teach elementary school. I like it, but the pay is poor."

I nodded.

"At least we've got the house," she said. "It's paid off. That was one favor he did me—or rather, Laura." She brushed back some blonde curls from her forehead. "I'm afraid I can't help you, Mr. Bannon."

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask if she knew anything about Saúl's recent girlfriends, but I thought better of it. Instead I got up and said, "I appreciate your giving me the time you did."

She rose also, smoothing the front of her old fashioned dress. "Good luck with your investigation. I'm glad Saúl had one friend. That's something he and I never were: friends."

I said goodbye and she watched me politely as I walked to my car. Then she turned into the house to help her daughter search for her brown-haired Barbie.

I drove back to my office and telephoned Homicide. Lieutenant Romero had gone out a few minutes before. They

weren't sure when he'd be back.

Raúl, a young man who runs routine leads for me, had left some credit checks on my desk. I leafed through them while I watched the wall clock crawl towards eternity. At three, I called Homicide again. Romero was still out. At four, I was informed that he had come in but left again. I gave up. It was time for happy hour at my favorite bar down the street.

The Berliner was a nice cosy place run by a German named Schultz. It had dark wood walls, exposed rafters, and blond butcher-block tables. The walls were lined with beer steins and other mementos of Germany. The woman behind the bar wore an immaculate white apron. In spite of its Prussian qualities, the Berliner made the best margaritas on my end of the Condado. I sat at the polished bar and ordered one.

Usually the place drew a small group of regulars and some tourists. This afternoon there were quite a few college kids who looked like they were coming from a beach party. Now that school was out for the holidays, they had to have something to do with their time.

I put the first margarita down pretty fast and ordered another. Its arrival coincided with that of an attractive young woman who slipped onto the bar stool next to mine. She had

the air of a woman familiar with happy hours and eager to be friendly. I'm not impervious to the charms of women, and offered to buy her a drink. She accepted with a smile. The smile displayed a perfect set of pearly teeth against a café au lait complexion and splendid dark hair. Her chocolate eyes were mischievous and inviting. In fact everything about her was inviting. She'd clearly had more than a couple of drinks already.

"Are you an American?" she asked in English.

"My father was. My mother was from Salinas."

"They're both dead?"

"Yes. In a car accident."

"I'm sorry," she said as we all automatically do, without really meaning it. She took a hefty chunk out of her rum and cola.

"Your English is very good," I said.

"I went to school in the States."

"What do you do now?"

"I'm a flight attendant with American Airlines. What about you?"

"I sell ladies' lingerie. The name's Carlos Bannon."

"Vivian Ramirez," she said, extending her little finger in a tipsy fashion. I shook it. "That must be an interesting profession," she cooed seductively.

"It's not exactly a profession.

I do pretty well."

"I'll bet you do," she cooed,

knocking back the rest of her drink.

I finished my own and ordered two more.

Ten minutes later she was telling me that I was sweet. I told her that she was sweet, too. She said that she was only twenty-five, but she liked older men. Young men didn't know enough. I said that that was a happy coincidence because I liked younger women. By our third drink we were chuckling head to head like old friends, and by six o'clock we were stumbling out to my car to go to my place. I was faking the stumbling; I couldn't be sure if she was.

I didn't believe her name was Vivian Ramirez and I didn't think she was a flight attendant with American Airlines. I didn't think we'd met by accident, either. I'm not that successful with women in bars.

We took the elevator up to my apartment with her arm around my waist. Although she should have felt the Browning under my arm, she didn't remark on it.

Vivian surveyed my living room while I went into the kitchen to make us some drinks. When I returned, she'd already kicked off her shoes.

"Your plants need water," she said.

"They always do. I don't have said

much luck with plants."

"They like music," she said, apparently serious.

"Any special kind?"

"Plants like baroque music," she said without the faintest trace of facetiousness. The words sounded odd on her lips. I wouldn't have expected the word "baroque" to be in her vocabulary.

"Well, I'll have to check through my record collection," I said.

She regarded me for a moment, strangely silent, then flopped back on the sofa. I flopped beside her. One of the straps of her tight black dress had fallen off her shoulder. Her eyes were closed; her lips slightly parted. I began making overtures to passion. Her breathing came faster, but the more familiar I became, the more I felt her body stiffen. Her nerves and sinews were taut as wire. Suddenly she jumped up and said she'd like another drink. I said I'd make it, but she said no, she'd do it. She grabbed my glass as well and padded into the kitchen.

When she returned with the two scotch and sodas, she handed me mine but remained standing with her own. She smiled with what I thought was some effort and raised her glass to her lovely lips. "*Salud*," she

We sipped together.

She seemed to loosen a bit and wandered over to my record collection, humming to herself.

I took another swallow of the scotch and laid my head back on the sofa. Suddenly I felt very relaxed. I closed my eyes and listened to her humming. Then I felt a little dizzy. Then I felt nothing.

Blurred shapes. My eyes wouldn't focus properly. My head ached. I closed my eyes and tried again.

In time things began to take on more or less normal form. When they had solidified, I discovered that I appeared to be alone in the apartment, and that the apartment had been searched. She had done it with unusual neatness, but it was clear that she had done it.

My watch, when I could finally read it, said a quarter to twelve. Black night pressed against the windows. I hoisted myself to my feet, every part of me feeling as if it were encased in flexible plastic, and made my way into the bedroom; she'd gone through that as well. Evidently Vivian Ramirez had been as curious about me as I had been about her. At least she hadn't taken my Browning, which still nestled under my armpit. With a heartfelt "Damn" I sank to the bed and let myself

fall back into uneasy oblivion.

When I awoke for the second time, it was broad daylight. Seven o'clock. I felt better than before, but still far from my usual bushy-tailed self. I forced my plastic limbs under a hot followed by a cold shower, and put on a full pot of strong coffee. An hour later I could almost face the prospect of resuming my place in the cheerful world of the 1980's.

My phone rang at nine as I was just stepping out the door. I picked it up and heard Romero's voice.

"Well, you're one hard man to get in touch with," I said by way of greeting.

"Some of us work for a living," he said.

"Not too many on the police force."

"Don't be snide," he said. "Why were you calling yesterday?"

"To find out what you learned at Masters Electronics, naturally."

"Quite a bit," Romero said. "But I don't see why I should share it with you."

"I'll make you a trade," I said, and I told him all about the Vivian Ramirez incident. He was snickering evilly by the end of it.

"You were some patsy," he said appreciatively.

"I knew she was up to something, but I didn't expect the drug."

"What do you think she was after?"

"Information about me. The same thing I was after when I invited her up. She must be connected with those two who took me for a ride."

"It looks like it."

"Her name's not Vivian Ramirez, of course."

"Of course not," Romero said. "But I think she may have been after something else besides information about you."

"Some names?" I guessed cleverly.

"Come on down to my office," he said, "and we'll talk about it."

By God, he *was* going to trade.

"I'll be there before you can blow your nose," I said.

The traffic was a mess all the way, but worst near the police *cuartel* in Hato Rey, since it's next to Plaza Las Americas, the most popular shopping mall in the Caribbean. Cars were parked everywhere except on top of each other. The place I found on the street was far enough away to assure me some healthy exercise.

"You took your time," Romero remarked as I came in.

He was sitting behind his desk, and next to it, in a beat-up metal chair, sat a slim middle-aged man in a grey sum-

mer-weight business suit. He was tall with salt and pepper hair and very light grey eyes. Romero introduced him as Agent Hurley from the local FBI office.

I shook his oversized hand and drew up a beat-up metal chair for myself.

"Agent Hurley is intrigued by your recent escapades," Romero said. "He wants to hear all about them."

So I recited my adventures with the two Cubans and Vivian Ramirez. Agent Hurley listened with cool seriousness, but Romero couldn't contain an occasional guffaw. When I'd finished, Hurley said:

"You're the one who found Castaño's body."

"That's right."

"Tell me about that evening."

I gave him a complete run-down, from Saúl's phone call until the police showed up.

"And you have no idea what this is all about," Hurley said more than asked.

"I suspect that it has something to do with Saúl's work."

"You're sure he didn't say *anything* else on the phone."

"I've tried to give you his exact words."

"You didn't search his apartment?" Hurley asked.

"Why should I?"

"Well, we did," he said, "and we didn't find anything."

"What were you looking for?"

"Some names." He paused. I waited. "Look," he said finally, "none of this goes beyond that door. Is that understood?"

I said it was understood.

"We were looking for the names of industrial spies that work at Masters Electronics. We have reason to believe there are at least two of them—and others connected with them."

I lit a cigarette thoughtfully; Hurley seemed to be monitoring my reaction to his revelation. All I said was, "So that's what it's about."

"The espionage has been going on for some time," Hurley continued. "We knew sensitive data about computer and laser technology was getting out of Masters—probably eventually winding up in Russia. We recruited Castaño to get into it, if he could. Only the president and company manager knew about him. Castaño managed to infiltrate the group—the details of how he did it don't concern you. His job was to find out the names of the real spies. Last Saturday he told me that he expected to have them soon. Apparently he did get them, but he took too much of a risk. He called you because he thought they were onto him and he didn't have much time."

"Why me? Why didn't he call you?"

"Castaño had instructions never to contact us by his home

phone. It might be tapped."

"So why didn't he call you from another phone or mail you the names?" I asked.

"I think he was afraid to move out of his apartment. From what you've said, he sounded worried enough on the phone."

"And you think he may have written the names down."

"It's a good possibility," Hurley said. "If he felt the danger was close enough, he might have hidden them somewhere in his apartment, hoping we'd find them later."

"But you didn't," I said. "So there probably aren't any names."

"I'm not yet convinced," Hurley said. "Castaño was smart, and dedicated."

"Well, I don't have them," I said. "What good would they do me? You and the Cubans and 'Vivian Ramirez' are barking up the wrong tree."

"This group is well organized," said Hurley. "They even had an executioners' code."

"A what?"

"A coded phone number to call if someone had to be put out of the way. Castaño knew it existed, but didn't know what it was. He hoped to eventually find that out, too. They used a code to protect the identity of their hit men."

"It sounds like a James Bond movie," I said.

"Life is getting to be like the

movies," said Hurley. "Do you know the KGB has an office that does nothing but study spy novels? They're always looking for new ideas."

"I'll be damned," I said. "Well, where do you go from here?"

"We'd hoped you'd provide us with a new lead," Hurley said.

"I have," I said. "In fact, three of them: two Cubans and a luscious lady."

"Nobody we've talked to knows your two Cubans," Romero broke in. "We haven't tried them on 'Vivian Ramirez' yet."

"Don't bother," Hurley said to him. "We know who she is: Castaño reported to her. Only we don't know her real name."

"Address or phone number?" I asked innocently.

"No. They're much too careful for that."

"Pity," I said. "Well, I for one would like to look over Saúl's apartment again. Maybe you missed the names."

"That's not very likely," Agent Hurley replied coolly.

"We've nothing to lose but time."

"All right," he agreed. "Let's drive over there."

Saúl Castaño's apartment looked brighter in the daytime, but otherwise much the same as when I'd left it three days ear-

lier. Hurley explained how they had gone about their search, dividing the apartment in sections, one for each of four men. They had examined the furniture, gone through every single book, magazine, and paper; they'd looked under the rugs, behind the pictures, in the refrigerator, the flowerpots, the toilet, the storage compartment at the bottom of the stove, even the air conditioner.

"Did you look inside the tape compartment of the VCR?" I asked.

They had.

"Did you try all the lights?"

"Why?" Hurley asked.

"If a light isn't working, the paper may be wedged up inside the socket behind the bulb."

He seemed to like that idea and immediately began turning on every light in the apartment. They all worked except for the one inside the oven. We took that out but there was no paper behind it.

We then removed the glass from the ceiling light fixtures and checked inside. Although several had bulbless sockets (being designed for two or three bulbs), none of the sockets held a piece of paper.

"You're an ingenious fellow, Bannon," Romero admitted grudgingly.

"I've been a P.I. for a long time."

"What's your next bright idea?"

I didn't have any next bright idea. I was beginning to think there wasn't any paper with names. On my third slow circuit of the rooms, I noticed a small rechargeable vacuum cleaner on the kitchen wall. I pointed to it. "Did you check inside that?" I asked Hurley. He said they hadn't; it was like Poe's purloined letter, so obvious on the wall that you tended to overlook it.

We fiddled the plastic gadget open, but found nothing inside but hair and dust.

"I ought to get us one of these," Romero said. He flicked some ashes from his cigarette on the kitchen counter and vacuumed them up. He smiled approvingly. "What the hell will they think of next?"

"It's handy for cleaning the car," Agent Hurley said.

"What is this, good house-keeping week?" I said.

Romero looked sheepish.

"Well, I guess Castaño didn't write down the names," Hurley conceded.

"Or else Bannon found them before us," Romero said. He was getting even for the good house-keeping crack.

I said, "Ho ho ho," and turned to Hurley: "Saúl was worried for his life. All I'd be thinking about under the circumstances

would be how to save my skin. I imagine he called me up to help him save his skin."

"It looks like you're right," Hurley said, "but he was a good operative. A good operative would try to get us the names, even under those circumstances."

"Well, then he meant to tell them to me, but they got to him first. After all, Saúl had no instructions to write down the names and he didn't say anything to anyone about writing down the names."

Hurley shrugged his sloping shoulders tiredly. Romero was playing with the little vacuum cleaner again. I leaned against the sink, fired another cigarette, and exhaled a long column of smoke as my eyes wandered vacantly over the much-searched apartment.

Backed into a recess of the kitchen wall were a washer and dryer, the type where the dryer fits on top of the washer. They'd been checked, of course, but now I noticed a short, flexible air tube, about four and a half inches in diameter, that came out of the side of the dryer and entered the wall.

"How about in there?" I asked Hurley.

"In where?"

"The dryer tube."

He had to squint to see it in the narrow shadowy space be-

tween the wall and the machine.

"I don't think so," he said.

With some effort I shoved the two machines flush against the wall opposite the tube, which made it easy for me to reach in and tug its plastic nozzle from the wall. I peered down the dusty hollow. Lying inside was a three by three inch piece of white paper. I said, "God-damn!" and snatched it out and waved it in front of our two guardians of justice. In large black script were two names, one below the other.

"Son of a bitch!" said Hurley happily.

Romero just looked slightly amazed.

We all returned to our own offices. Maria was just leaving for lunch and asked me why I looked like the cat that ate the canary. And that was how I felt. I pulled the office bottle of Palo Viejo from the file cabinet and poured myself three fingers of rum. I carried the glass back to my desk, leaned back in my chair, put my feet up, and toasted my ineffable genius.

I thought back over the events of the past few days. Hurley had the names of his industrial spies, but Romero didn't have his murderer—probably the little penguin with the beady eyes, one of their "executioners," who

had a cute coded phone number. Apparently "Vivian Ramirez" was a liaison between the moles at Masters Electronics and the foreigners after the information. Which meant that she was a lot brighter than she looked.

I took another sip from my drink and ruminated to the music of the car horns in the *Navidades* traffic jam on Ashford Avenue. My ancient air conditioner wheezed a suitable accompaniment. I must have sat like that in the empty office for half an hour, my head pillowed against my arm, before I pushed myself upright and grabbed the phone.

For a change, I caught Romero in. "This is Bannon again," I said. "Are you interested in solving the Castaño murder?"

We were having a late lunch in an open-air *cafetin* near my office. Romero was being difficult, as usual.

"There's no reason to suppose that's the code," he said.

"There's every reason to suppose it. What she said was just too odd under the circumstances. It didn't fit the role she was playing that night. And after she said it, she seemed to be waiting to see how—or if—I reacted."

"Why would she try it on you?"

"Because she wasn't sure what my part in this whole scheme was. These people don't trust each other—often they don't even know each other. That's why they use gimmicks like codes. She wanted to see if I recognized the phrase."

"It is an odd phrase," Romero admitted. "What exactly does 'baroque' mean, anyway?"

"It usually refers to seventeenth century art: very ornate, decorative—cherubs and roses and that sort of thing. It's applied to music, painting, architecture."

"Well, even if 'plants like baroque music' is the code," Romero said, "that doesn't help us much. We still have to decipher it."

"The Feds have people who specialize in ciphers," I said. "But we may not need them."

"You mean you think you can crack it yourself?" Romero asked sarcastically.

"I've already given it some thought. Let's say that 'plant' refers to someone planted in a group—a double agent, which is just what Saúl Castaño was. The counterintelligence boys use them all the time."

"All right, let's suppose that," Romero said, humoring me.

"And let's suppose 'music' refers to the plant's revealing the group's secrets."

"You do have an imagina-

tion," Romero said. "But go on."

"Then the question would be: why *baroque* music?"

"Yes, I suppose it would," Romero said, doing all he could to keep from breaking into a giggle.

"But I can think of one good reason for the word 'baroque.' Remember, this is the code for a telephone number."

"Yes, I remember."

"And how many letters has 'baroque'?"

"How's it spelled?" Romero asked seriously.

"B-A-R-O-Q-U-E. Seven letters—the same number of letters, or rather digits, as in a telephone number."

"Jesus Christ," he said. "Is this why you had me come all the way down here for lunch?"

"I think we should work on it," I said. "Or ask the counterintelligence guys to work on it."

"Why would they use an *English* code phrase?" Romero asked. "This is Puerto Rico."

"But the people in the upper echelons of this group aren't Puerto Ricans. Hurley thinks they're Russians. Besides, I imagine a lot of the people connected with Masters Electronics and other prime targets for industrial espionage are gringos."

"You think the 'executioners' are involved with espionage in other plants in Puerto Rico?"

"It could be. That would be one excellent reason for keeping their identities so secret."

For the moment, he seemed lost for a rejoinder.

"Let's go to my office and give it a try," I said. "Give me a couple of hours."

"I'm pretty busy," he said.

"If we solve your homicide, they'd have been a couple of very valuable hours."

"*Está bien*," he said. "Now will you let me eat my sandwich?"

Romero's first suggestion was that we convert the letters of "baroque" to their numerical positions in the English alphabet. This gave us a phone number of 2-1-18-15-17-21-5. Since I'd never seen a phone number like that, I doubted he was on the right track.

I tried various clever things like skipping back letters in the alphabet, using reverse geometrical progressions, or subtracting according to different set patterns. None of them produced anything even close to a phone number.

Then Romero, still enamored of his simpler idea, suggested that we use the first digit of each pair in his original crazy phone number. This gave us 2-1-1-1-1-2-5. But since there are no phone numbers on the island

beginning with 2, I wasn't too thrilled with this suggestion either. Romero said we could change the initial 2 to a 6. I argued that this was inconsistent: no one would invent a code without some basic consistency.

Actually I thought he was beginning to enjoy the puzzle, but I was getting more and more fed up with it.

"Then let's be consistent and add four to each digit," he said. He worked it out on paper and, by God, it *did* look like a valid phone number.

"You may have it!" I said.

We drove over to police headquarters and checked the reverse directory. Our coded phone number was listed as a Catholic high school, Colegio Santa Maria, in Hato Rey. Romero called it anyway. He got a woman named Señora Velazquez in the school's admissions office. He hung up the phone with a clang.

"This is a wild goose chase," he said.

"I guess so," I agreed, feeling lower than a rainy Monday morning.

I ambled to the fortress-like sealed windows and looked down on a cop trying to sort out the details of a two-car fender bender just below us. One of the participants was waving his arms like an orchestra conductor.

I ambled back to Romero's desk and said, "I see one other possibility."

"Which is?"

"That we add four to every single-digit number and to the second digit of each two-digit number."

Romero pulled a sheet of paper in front of him and broke out his Papermate ballpoint. He started calculating and then grimaced: "That gives us a third digit of 12."

"Drop the carry-over digit. That makes it a 2."

He worked it that way, and we had what looked like a bona fide phone number again. We looked it up in the reverse directory. Romero's grimace turned into a cautious smile: "It's a Cuban restaurant named El Camaguey in Santurce."

"This could be it," I said excitedly.

"I suppose it's worth a try," he agreed.

It was after six when we drove down to Santurce in two unmarked cars, Romero and I in one and three other detectives in the other. The restaurant, which looked more like a bar, was on a side street off Fernandez Juncos, and we parked at either end of the short street where we all had a good view of the entrance. The Camaguey was an old wooden place with a garish neon sign over the

door. It looked narrow but deep, like most of the businesses beside it, with little street frontage. I recognized the blue Oldsmobile parked in front.

"That's their car," I told Romero. "The one I took a ride in."

"You're sure?"

"It's got to be: too much of a coincidence."

"Should we move in now or wait a while?"

"It's your case."

"Let's wait a while."

There wasn't much activity on the block. People don't walk much any more in Santurce. At night, some are afraid to drive through it. The restaurant was open, but only one person went in during the next twenty minutes: a squat, middle-aged man in maroon pants and a black T-shirt. He looked like a drunk.

"I think we should move in," I said impatiently. "Sitting here, we'll attract attention sooner or later."

"Okay," Romero said. He signaled to those in the other car, and all five of us made for the entrance. We drew our guns as we went in. There was a man working behind the bar and another at the cash register. The man with the maroon pants was on a bar stool drinking a beer. Two stools over from him sat an obese black woman, also drinking a beer. At a table against the wall sat Fatso and

the penguin. The two of them jumped as we came through the door and Romero yelled, "Don't move an eyelid!"

The penguin had instinctively reached behind him, but he froze when he saw our guns trained on him. He and Fatso lifted their hands while the other detectives quickly checked out the man at the cash register and the bartender. Neither had a gun. The two customers were watching all this goggle-eyed.

We herded them all together in front of the bar while two of the detectives kicked open the door to the tiny kitchen. It was empty.

By now Romero had frisked Fatso and the little guy while I covered them. He found the small caliber, nickel-plated automatic tucked into the back of the penguin's pants. He found my .357 Magnum in a brand new shoulder holster on the fat one.

The little guy treated me to

a baleful stare as we shooed them out the door and into the cars.

Ballistics later made a perfect match between the penguin's gun, a Beretta 950 BS Auto, and the slugs that had killed Saúl Castaño.

FBI Agent Hurley picked up his two spies at Masters Electronics. If he found out exactly who was buying the electronics data they stole, he never told us.

"Vivian Ramirez," one step ahead of us, disappeared—most probably to someplace like the Bahamas. Even Fatso and the penguin didn't know her real name. As I'd guessed, she had acted as liaison between the lower echelon and whoever contracted the spying. Apparently Saúl had been careless or taken too much of a risk, and it was she who had made the phone call that killed him.

We never heard of her again.

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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Goner with the wind than we thought. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's *Mystery Magazine*, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the February Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

Desert Kill

by David Braly



Illustration by Patrick Welsh

64
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Sheriff Leo Austin had expected that the victim's body would lie at a turn in the road or between two knolls or someplace else ideal for an ambush. Instead, it lay on straight highway. Austin could see the flashing lights of the police cars and ambulance a mile away. The Central Oregon high desert lay flat around the scene for at least three miles in every direction.

Rain fell. Rain had been falling for more than twenty-four hours, heavy even on this side of the Cascades. As Austin approached the murder scene he hoped that the killer had been dumb enough to have parked or walked off the highway, leaving tire tracks or footprints.

Austin parked his Bronco II on the highway shoulder, turned off the wipers, and cut off the engine. When he stepped out he heard the motors of the other vehicles, some of which had been parked there for half an hour, burning gas to no purpose. It had been the same in California, when he'd been sheriff in Mountain View.

A dull grey tarp covered what was obviously a body on the highway's left shoulder. On the right shoulder stood a vehicle without motor running or lights flashing, a white 1983 Ford half-ton pickup truck that'd doubtlessly belonged to the vic-

tim. A sign on the driver's side door said SHOTGUN CREEK HEREFORD RANCH, SAWYERVILLE, OREGON.

Austin walked past the body to the group of uniformed men standing beside one of the white Oregon State Police cars. Two of the men wore the olive brown uniforms of Metolius County deputies, three wore the dark blue uniforms of OSP troopers, and the other two wore green paramedic uniforms.

One of the deputies, Under-sheriff Conroy Nash, left the group to meet Austin.

"It's eerie," said Nash without preamble. "I was talking to him just last night."

"Who was he?"

"Scott Moncreiffe. He owns the Shotgun Creek Hereford Ranch down near the county line. About five thousand acres, but because of the poor soil probably only a couple of hundred head of cattle. He was only about forty years old. Didn't have an enemy in the world that I heard tell of. I talked to him just last night, about nine o'clock, in the parking lot behind the Chief Paunina Inn and Lounge."

OSP Sergeant Walt Cooper walked up, greeted Austin, and looked down at the tarp-covered body. He pulled his blue Smokey the Bear hat down tighter, trying to keep the rain

from hitting the back of his neck.

"Hell of a thing, ain't it?" said Cooper. "A good guy like Scott getting killed out here like this in the middle of the night."

"You do know it was last night, then?" said Austin.

"Yeah. His truck lights were on when we arrived. The bullet took off half his head, but the water's washed away almost all the blood. That took time. . . . From the way things sit—his truck being parked over on the other side of the road and him having walked back here on this side—we think he must've stopped for something and walked back. Maybe someone pretending to have car trouble or something. There had to have been another vehicle here or whoever killed him would've taken Scott's. I'd hoped we would find some footprints or tire tracks because of this rain, but we didn't. Whoever it was must've stayed on the highway."

"Conroy says Mr. Moncreiffe didn't have any enemies," said Austin.

Cooper frowned. "I wouldn't go that far, Leo. Certainly he had damned few enemies and a whole lot of friends. A real nice guy, Scott. But I wouldn't say he had no enemies at all."

The paramedics rolled their gurney over.

Cooper asked Austin: "Did you want to look at the body before they haul it away? Not much to see. Like I said, half his head is gone. Probably a rifle bullet, but we won't know for sure until the state medical examiner takes a look at him."

"I'll pass."

Cooper nodded to the paramedics. They lifted the body onto the gurney, then loaded the gurney into the ambulance. Austin and the others watched. One of the OSP troopers followed in his patrol car when they drove off.

"I would hate to die out here," said Nash.

Austin looked around. For miles in every direction lay flat desert, its monotony broken only by the differing patterns formed by the clusters of juniper trees and sagebrush. Four or five miles east lay small blue hills which resembled enormous potatoes someone had half-buried in the desert. Far away in the west the snow-laden Cascades peaked over the horizon, distant, cold, and in the steady rain hazy. The only sign of human existence in the whole area was the highway, a straight line of narrow asphalt that appeared on the desert horizon of the north and disappeared on the desert horizon of the south. If the wind was blowing against the junipers and sagebrush,

perhaps the area would feel less lonely because of their movement, but there was no wind, only steady, monotonous rain.

"Who were his enemies?" Austin asked Cooper.

"Several people didn't like him, but I only know of three who really hated him. I don't think they hated him enough to kill him, but you never know about some people."

The other state trooper walked up. He asked Cooper if he needed him there any longer, and Cooper answered no. The man said hello to Austin, then got into his car and drove off.

Nash signaled the other county deputy that he could leave also, which he promptly did.

Only Austin, Nash, and Cooper remained, huddled against the cold rain beside Cooper's white patrol car, its overheads flashing silently.

"As I was saying," resumed Cooper, "Scott had only three enemies that I know of. One was his wife. She left him about three, four months ago, swearing she would take him for everything he had. They'd only been married a year. His first wife died in that big passenger plane crash down in California several years ago. Scott didn't have much luck with his wives."

"Now that ain't fair," interrupted Nash. "Dora—that was

his first wife, Leo—was a real gem."

"Oh, I didn't mean that Dora was anything like Velma. I just meant that in the end Scott didn't have the lifetime of happiness a fellow like him ought to have. Velma married him for his money—everyone knows that—and then found out that having five thousand acres of arid land didn't make a man rich. She found herself sitting atop the five thousand acres, but it was no garden and the house she lived in and the car she drove was no better than that of any Sawyerville millworker or store clerk. She left him. She hasn't filed for divorce yet, which is strange. I know she's seen a lawyer, Ambrose Pike, Jr."

"Who else?" asked Austin.

"Tom Garroway. He and Moncreiffe have been enemies all their lives, ever since they were children. I don't know why. I doubt if even they would've remembered what started it all. They've had a few fistfights during the years, but mostly they try to best or embarrass each other on social or civic occasions. Last one I heard about was just a month ago, when Scott beat Tom out for the treasurer's job on the Metolius County Cattlemen's Association. No big deal by itself. Just another little skirmish in their

own version of the Thirty Years' War."

"I remember now who the third one would be," said Nash. "Keith Prescott."

Cooper nodded.

"Prescott?" said Austin.

"One of our local thugs," said Nash. "You would be meeting him sooner or later anyway, and probably sooner. The Sawyerville police and us have arrested him two or three dozen times over the years, starting when he was a high school student. Just about the full gauntlet of petty crime, from vandalism to theft. Only one conviction. Scott Moncreiffe caught him a couple of years ago loading up one of his cows. Scott had a rifle across the rear window of his pickup. He held Prescott with it while he radioed the police on the emergency channel of his CB radio. The judge gave Prescott a year in the state pen, although the Parole Board cut him loose in two months. That's the only time he ever did time, though, and he hated Scott for it. Even more so because Scott let it slip out afterward that his rifle hadn't been loaded."

"Scott started having trouble a few months after Prescott's return to Sawyerville," said Cooper. "Fences cut, haystacks burned, cows shot, that sort of thing. Ranchers usually have

to put up with a certain amount of vandalism, but this became excessive. Finally, your predecessor went to Prescott and warned him to cool it or he'd make it his personal business to send him away again. Prescott had his lawyer threaten the sheriff, but the vandalism dropped dramatically. Still, I've heard that when he's drunk in one of the Sawyerville bars Prescott still threatens to get even with Scott Moncreiffe. And Prescott's a mean one, Leo."

Once, early in his career, Austin would've jumped to the conclusion that Prescott was their most likely suspect. No longer. He'd been in police work long enough now to know that criminals seldom killed people who caught them, testified against them, or voted to convict them. Exceptions existed. Maybe Prescott was one, but Austin wouldn't assume that. He wouldn't even assume that the murderer was one of the three suspects named by Cooper and Nash.

"How'll we handle it, Leo?" asked Nash.

"Ask Keith Prescott and Tom Garroway to come in for a visit. One of you question each of them. You know them, so you know how to handle them. I'll go to Mrs. Moncreiffe, tell her about the murder, and if she's strong enough ask her some

questions. . . . Did Scott Moncreiffe have kids or anyone else at his ranch?"

"Two teenagers by his first marriage," said Cooper. "I know the boy. I could tell him if you'd prefer."

Austin shook his head. "It's my job. I sought it, so I'll take everything that comes with it, even this. Thanks anyway."

"The ranch is straight down the highway," said Cooper. "There's a big sign at the entrance that says 'Shotgun Creek Hereford Ranch.' You can't miss it."

"I've got to learn the local geography," said Austin, turning toward his tan Bronco II. "I thought Shotgun Creek was in the forest."

"It starts in the Metolius National Forest, but flows across half the county," said Cooper. "It's a long creek."

Austin drove down the wet highway for half an hour before he reached the ranch. A sign reading SHOTGUN CREEK HEREFORD RANCH was spread across two tall gate posts. The gate was logs and barbed wire, and the fence spreading from the gate on both sides was also three strands of barbed wire attached to ancient log posts. A log cattleguard lay beneath the gate. Beyond the gate, a narrow, deeply-rutted dirt road led to a distant two story white

house. Smoke rose from the chimney. No cattle were in sight.

Austin's drive from the gate to the house was bumpy.

The house itself proved old and in bad need of paint. A huge pair of elms stood in front of it, and several willows and apple trees nearby, but no lawn. An old washing machine stood on the big front porch.

A girl answered Austin's knock. When Cooper said that Moncreiffe's children were "teenagers," Austin had visualized a boy and a girl in their late teens. The girl was clearly much younger.

"Hello. I'm Sheriff Austin. Is your brother home?"

The girl, a short brunette dressed in Western shirt and jeans, nodded. "Not in the house, though. Up at the subdivision."

"The subdivision?"

"The old Wexler place. It used to be a ranch. About twenty years ago some Californians bought it, divided it into lots, and called it a 'recreational subdivision.' Servicemen bought lots by mail, through army magazine advertisements and such. It was just sagebrush and juniper, though. No water, no sewer, no nothing. Dad bought most of the old lots cheap, to graze cattle on, only it isn't much good for that, either."

"Where is it?"

She walked out, across the

porch, and down onto the barren ground in front of it. Austin followed her. When she was about ten feet from the house, she turned and pointed toward a road that ran from the main ranch road up a hill west of the house.

"Follow that road," she said. "It'll take you right to 'Sun Empire Estates.'"

"Okay. Thanks."

"What's wrong, anyway?" she asked. "I know Peter hasn't done nothing, 'cause Peter never does anything illegal."

"How old is Peter?"

"Eighteen."

Austin felt relief at hearing that information. "I've got some bad news," he said. "I'll fetch him back and we'll both tell you."

Austin returned to his Bronco II. He knew he shouldn't leave the girl in suspense, but it would be worse to tell her now, with no member of her family present. Better to let her wait, to allow her imagination to prepare her for the double shock, first of learning that she was now an orphan and second of learning that her father had died by violence.

Had Austin driven out in a patrol car instead of his Bronco II he would never have reached the old subdivision. This trail made the road from the gate to the house feel smooth by comparison. It was narrow, twisted,

rutted, studded with huge rocks, and in some places the grade was so steep that Austin could hardly ascend it even by flooring his accelerator. The twisting two mile journey was as bumpy as a bucking horse. And, because of the steady rain, the road was slippery.

He came to an area thickly covered with junipers and sagebrush. The road led through the junipers, after which he found himself on a steep incline that led to a small log bridge across a muddy stream. The bridge creaked when he crossed. The road then sharply ascended a hill, across which Austin couldn't see until he actually reached the top.

When he did reach it, he saw laid out before him what the girl had called Sun Empire Estates.

It was a vast, flat area, with fewer and younger junipers and sagebrush than Austin had just driven through. The remains of what had once been dirt roads crisscrossed it. At each intersection of these former roads was a steel pole, atop which were two metal strips, one facing north and south, the other east and west. Names, barely visible now after years of weathering, were on the strips. On the pole closest to Austin, the names were "Mt. Hood Blvd." and "Columbia River Ave."

Street signs for streets that no longer existed, standing in the desert rain for as far as the eye could see. No houses, no other buildings, only sagebrush, junipers, and several dozen grazing Herefords.

Austin paused to look over the eerie scene for a minute, then headed toward Mt. Hood Blvd. He went onto the old flat-tended line—he thought it had probably never been a road, only a wide line pushed out by a Caterpillar blade—and continued down it past the long, silent street signs. He dared not pause again, fearful his tires would become mired in the soft mud.

Ahead stood street post after street post. Most were straight, a few leaned this direction or that, a few lay flat on the ground. A quarter-mile into the "sub-division" Austin came upon a pole whose cross-signs had an added feature: a crow sat atop them, staring at him. Austin thought the huge black bird would fly off when he approached, but it didn't. It watched him go past, never moving anything other than its head.

Austin had read somewhere that crows lived to be a hundred years old. A crow born the same day as he would probably outlive him by thirty years. This bothered him.

Suddenly he noticed move-

ment to his left. He looked, saw a young man riding toward him on a brown horse. The youth wore a yellow raincoat and slouching black hat. He handled his horse easily.

Austin stopped, got out just as the youth reined in.

"Peter Moncreiffe?" said Austin. The boy nodded. "I'm Sheriff Austin. I'm afraid I have some bad news for you."

The boy dismounted.

"Is it Dad? I thought something had happened when he didn't come in last night. He hadn't planned to stay over in Sawyerville. It's Dad, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so, Peter. He apparently stopped—or maybe was stopped—on the highway last night on his way home. Someone shot him. . . . He's dead."

"Sh-shot him. . . . Who?"

"We don't know. . . . I was hoping maybe you might have an idea."

Peter absentmindedly began stroking the horse's nose. "No," he said. "Unless. . . . No, she wouldn't."

"Who?"

"Velma. Dad's wife. She left us, was going to get a divorce, which was fine and dandy by Sandy and me. Sandy! Have you told Sandy?"

"If that's your sister, no. I thought it best if you were present."

"Thank you, sheriff. I appreciate that. She's a tough little

cookie, but she and Dad were real close and . . . Well, I just appreciate it, that's all."

"Dead!" Velma Moncreiffe half-sat, half-fell onto her white sofa. She looked at the red and yellow rug that covered her floor and slowly shook her head.

She was a tall woman, slender, light-complexioned, with thick blonde hair and pale blue eyes. Her eye shadow and lipstick were heavy enough to be noticeable. She wore a red and white blouse above tight navy pants.

Austin stood facing her and the window behind her where the rain continued to fall. Velma Moncreiffe lived several miles east of Sawyerville on a five acre parcel isolated by a grove of pine trees from her nearest neighbors. Austin could see some of these trees through the big picture window. Ponderosa pines, they towered toward the dark grey sky. Austin liked to be near tall pine trees on rainy days, especially at houses in the country. Normally, anyway.

"I can't believe it," said Velma. "I saw him in Sawyerville just the day before yesterday. How did he die?"

"Someone shot him."

Velma looked up at him, eyes

wide. "Shot him! What do you mean 'shot him'? Who'd shoot Scotty? I don't think anyone disliked that man more than I, and I certainly wouldn't, so who would? Was it an accident?"

"We don't think so," said Austin.

Velma rose and walked to a coffee table near the sofa. She extracted a cigarette out of a package of L&M's, put it between her lips, and lit it with a lighter that'd been on the table beside the package.

"You're saying he was murdered," she told Austin. "Right?"

"Yes, ma'am. Last night sometime, on his way home."

"Murdered. Scotty murdered. . . . Those poor kids. I never particularly liked them, but they don't deserve this. . . . Who did it? Tom Garroway?"

"We don't know—yet."

"I'll bet it was Tom." Velma stepped away from the coffee table, began to pace impatiently back and forth across the floor. "He and Scotty were enemies from the day they met."

She walked to the fireplace where she leaned over and began to move blocks of wood from the outer hearth into the inner hearth against the andirons. Her fanny was pointed toward Austin and he quietly appreciated the shape and curves of her body while she went about her task. Finally done, she lit the

wood with a match from the mantel. The fire began, burned listlessly for a minute until Velma grabbed a poker and hit the wood several times. The flames grew. "There," she said, replacing the poker.

"I understand that you were going to divorce Mr. Moncreiffe," said Austin.

"Divorce?" She turned to face him. "I don't know which little rumor-mongers you've been chatting with, sheriff, but that ain't true."

"Oh?"

"I hadn't even filed for formal separation, let alone divorce. I still loved Scotty. If it wasn't for those rotten kids of his and his old fashioned ideas, there would've been no problems. I did see Ambrose Pike, Jr., about filing a divorce when I first left him, but, well, I cooled down. We were getting along amiably enough, sheriff. In fact, the last time we saw each other—the day before yesterday in Saw-erville, like I told you—we talked about getting back together. We really loved each other."

"What 'old fashioned ideas' did you find objectionable, Mrs. Moncreiffe?"

Austin noticed that Velma's face tightened. She didn't like the question even a little bit.

"Let's just say that he was born and raised a rancher, be-

lieved that ranching was the best occupation a man could have even if he lost money every year doing it, and closed his mind to opportunities that could have made him a much more successful, happier man."

"What sort of opportunities?"

Her face hardened. "I'm truly sorry, sheriff, but you're intruding into personal affairs."

"I see. . . . Where were you last night between nine thirty and twelve o'clock?"

Velma drew deeply on her cigarette, exhaling the smoke through her mouth and nostrils at the same instant, and studied Austin with suspicious eyes.

"Am I a suspect?" she asked.

"We have no suspects yet. All we're trying to do now is learn about Mr. Moncreiffe, learn about the people who were associated with him in any way, and learn where these people were last night."

"I think I should call Ambrose."

Austin shrugged. "That's your prerogative."

Velma turned her back on Austin and walked to the big picture window. For a minute she stood silently looking at the rain falling between the house and the giant pines.

"What the hell." She faced him again, without moving from the window. "I've nothing to hide."

Austin reached into his shirt pocket and removed his Miranda card. "Just the same, Mrs. Moncreiffe, since you do feel that you are some sort of suspect, I'm going to advise you of your rights."

Austin read the card aloud. When he asked Velma if she understood, she smiled and nodded and drew deeply on the cigarette and then exhaled the smoke again through her lips and nostrils.

"I was here," she said. "All night, alone."

"Did you talk to anyone on the phone?" Velma shook her head. "Is there anyone who can vouch for your being here, Mrs. Moncreiffe?"

"No. But I did watch television all night. Channel Six until eleven thirty, then Channel Eight. All night, sheriff. I can recite the plots. I'm an avid television fan."

"Unfortunately plots can be learned from previews and newspaper schedules, even if they weren't reruns."

"They weren't reruns. *Dallas* at nine, then *Falcon Crest*, then the KOIN news, then over to eight for the *Tonight Show* and *Late Night*. I can recite the plots in greater detail than you could get from the TV listings or previews, plus what happened on the news and the two talk shows. I can even tell you that about

ten fifteen there was an interruption because of network transmission problems. And you can then run down all my friends, sheriff, and confirm that I didn't get any of that information from them."

"Do you own a VCR?" asked Austin.

"I did. It's still at the ranch. I used to record *Miami Vice* while I was watching *Dallas*, but now I can't. I was planning to buy another one, but then things started looking better between Scotty and me. I didn't want two."

"Tell me about *Dallas* and *Falcon Crest*," said Austin.

She told him. In detail, for a half hour, she told him. Austin, who'd seen both programs last night, recognized her recollections of the shows as accurate.

He took out his notepad to record her recollections of the KOIN news, the *Tonight Show*, and *Late Night*. He hadn't watched these programs, so it would be necessary to check her accounts against those of people who had or of the television station in Portland. She even recalled several specific jokes, though, and Austin believed her when she said she'd seen the programs.

"Do you own a gun?" he asked when she finished talking about Letterman's last guest.

"Yes. An Italian Beretta

seven - ought - sixty - five."

"May I see it, please?"

Velma left the room. She returned three minutes later with the small pistol, which she handed to Austin.

He examined it, noted that it was fully loaded and looked as if it'd never been fired. But looks could be deceiving. Austin never claimed to be an expert where guns were concerned. He seldom carried one himself. He wore one today, but today he was involved with a murder investigation.

"I would like ballistics to examine this," he told her. "I can have it back to you in a week."

"What'll I do for protection in the meantime? This place is a bit far out of town for me to be unarmed."

"You don't own any other guns?"

"No. I've never had reason to fire one, so there's never been cause to buy a second."

"Are you planning to be in town today?" asked Austin. When Velma nodded, he said, "Stop by Paunina Hardware. Jim'll loan you a pistol on my recommendation."

Velma nodded. Austin noticed that she'd disposed of her cigarette someplace, probably when she went to fetch the gun.

"Thanks for your cooperation," said Austin, turning to leave.

"One thing, sheriff. I hope you get whoever killed Scotty. We didn't get along all the time but we loved each other. We really did. And even if we hadn't, he was one hell of a sweet guy and he deserved a better end than this."

"Don't expect me to shed any tears for Scott Moncreiffe. I won't say that he got what he had coming to him, but it didn't lack much."

Austin listened in silence while Tom Garroway answered the questions put to him by Conroy Nash. Nash's heavy, middle-aged body leaned threateningly over the rancher, and Austin wondered if Garroway realized how lucky he was that the days of third degree interrogations had passed. Certainly the undersheriff would like to punch Garroway.

"You hated Scott, didn't you?" said Nash.

"You know I did."

"Why?"

"We've always hated each other, Conroy. You know that, too."

"That's not an answer—and you know that."

Garroway shook his head softly. "It's the only answer I can give you. We've hated each other since we first met, when we were about seven or eight

years old. Hate at first sight, I guess. I don't remember now."

Austin studied Garroway while the rancher talked. The man was about five nine, slender in body and face, with sandy hair and a complexion unusually light and soft for a rancher. He wore a brown snap-button Western shirt, wide belt with large silver buckle, and bluejeans. The bluejeans were faded, but not prefaded the way many people who thought faded jeans were chic bought them.

"Hated him enough to kill him," said Nash flatly.

Garroway shook his head. "Maybe once; no more."

"When?"

"High school. We've always hated each other, but never more than in high school. Junior high school and high school. We liked to've killed each other in a couple of fights in junior high. In high school, we had one fight in our freshman year and no more. But we were always on the brink of another fight. It built. The tension, the hatred, the resolve. I think we both knew that the next fight would be the worst ever, that maybe one of us would kill the other. But we never fought again in high school. We graduated, I went to college and he to the army, and we didn't fight again until about ten years after high school. By that time the antag-

onism had declined. It never did grow back to where it'd been during high school, but we always hated each other bitterly."

Austin wondered if Moncreiffe and Garroway had once been friends. He would almost be willing to bet that they had. The worst hatreds developed between friends who split up.

"Where were you last night, Tom?" asked Nash.

"At what time?"

"Between nine thirty and midnight."

For the first time Austin saw Garroway's confidence shaken. Nothing blatant, just a flicker of the eyes, a twitch of the lower lip that lasted for a fraction of a second.

"I was out of town yesterday," said Garroway. "I was in Bend most of the day, then drove back to Sawyerville through Redmond and Prineville. I arrived here about eight in the evening, spent about an hour or more at the River Club, where I had a few drinks and played some blackjack. Bill Longman, Al Benson, Harvey Groff, and Reginald Frohock were there. They saw me."

"What time did you leave the River Club?" asked Nash.

"Nine, nine thirty, somewhere in there. I stopped for gas at Vic's, then headed home."

Nash had been standing over

Garroway, who was seated in a chair in front of Nash's desk. Austin sat facing Garroway in a chair whose back was to the wall. Now Nash walked around the desk, seated himself, and folded his hands on its top.

"And your ranch is near the Shotgun Creek Hereford Ranch, right?"

"Hell, no. I'm a good eleven miles from that place, Conroy. There's BLM land, Frohock land, and two small ranches between us and the Moncreiffe place."

Nash stared hard at him. "But you reach your place using the same highway that Scott uses to reach his. The same highway he was killed on."

"Well, sure, for a while. The highway goes right past his front gate. I take a turnoff about five miles before I reach his place, then follow that road for six miles to reach my front gate. Then it's another half mile to my house."

"What time did you arrive home?" asked Nash.

Garroway didn't answer. Whatever confidence remained in him vanished; Austin saw actual fear on his face.

"Well?" prompted Nash testily.

Still Garroway hesitated. He looked from Nash to Austin and back to Nash again. The only sound came from outside the

room, where two deputies were talking in the main office, and outside the building, where the rain gently drummed against the windows and roof.

"All right," said Nash. "I can't force you to answer. You're not under arrest, yet, but this makes it look a lot worse for you, Tom."

"I-I-I'll answer. I just needed to get a hold on myself. It's the way things are stacking up here, Conroy. Stacking up against me when I didn't do a thing to Moncreiffe. Haven't even seen him in two weeks."

"Once again, then," said Nash. "What time did you arrive home?"

"Almost eleven."

Nash couldn't conceal his surprise. Austin didn't know Garroway, so he had no reason to be surprised by anything the man said or did.

"Conroy, I swear it had nothing to do with what happened to Scott Moncreiffe," said Garroway, racing the words out. "It was a flat. Two flats, actually."

"Two flats in one night?"

"I was about two miles out when the tire on my right front went out. I had to get out in the rain and change it. I've never been any good at changing tires, so it took quite a while. Then, after I got the damned thing on, I saw that it was half down also.

So I had to take it off and put on my other spare, a studded tire."

Nash leaned back in his chair, his eyes voicing his skepticism louder than his mouth ever could.

"Look in my trunk," said Garroway, sounding almost desperate. "Ask my wife and kids. I told them what happened when I got home. And cars and trucks were whizzing by the whole time I was there. Someone would remember."

"And all we have to do is ask everyone in Central Oregon," said Nash.

Garroway's look of fear turned into a look of defiance. "If you really want to discover who murdered Scott Moncreiffe, that's exactly what you might have to do."

The buzzer sounded on every radio and scanner within hearing distance. Nash stopped questioning Garroway, and Austin also listened for the dispatcher's voice that would follow the buzzing, which announced a fire report. If the fire was outside the city limits, the sheriff's department would have to provide traffic control at the scene. The dispatcher reported a car on fire in front of a local restaurant, within the city limits.

Nash turned his attention back to Garroway. "Do you own a gun?" he said.

"I own a half dozen guns. A couple of pistols and four rifles. I've also got a couple of old rifles in the barn that haven't worked probably in my lifetime. I just keep them because they're so old."

"Would you bring your guns in so that we can have ballistics test bullets fired from them, to see if they match the bullet that killed Scott? We can't force you, understand. This is only an official request."

"No problem. I wish you would, so I'll be cleared. And that you'll look at those tires, too. You'll see I was telling you the truth, Conroy."

"We'll be glad to look at the tires," said Nash. "I've got no further questions for you at the moment, but stay in the county until this is cleared up."

For a half minute Garroway remained seated, looking from Nash to Austin in puzzlement, as though surprised that he was being allowed to leave. Then he rose, looked at the door, back at Nash, and walked toward the door. He stopped at the door and turned to face Nash again.

"We were enemies, Conroy, and there's no denying that," he said. "But I've never really hated him enough to kill him."

Garroway walked out.

"Now that's what I call a prime suspect," said Nash.

Austin shook his head. "If he'd hated Scott Moncreiffe for

thirty years without killing him, he'd need more motive than hatred for killing him now. Besides, if he did intend to kill him, he's had thirty years to plan it. Does it look like thirty years of planning to you? If I'd planned to kill someone, I would've made sure I had some sort of alibi."

"I'll be damned," said Nash. "You think it's Velma Moncreiffe."

Austin laughed, jumped to his feet. "I didn't say that. It could be Garroway. He's a suspect, she's a suspect. But neither are *prime* suspects, at least to me. And let's not forget our young friend Mr. Prescott."

"After you've met him you won't refer to him as a 'friend' even in jest, Leo."

OSP's Sawyerville station was diagonally across the street from the Metolius Sheriff's Department offices, which meant that Austin merely had to walk over when Cooper phoned that they had brought in Prescott. In Prescott's case the police didn't merely request his presence. OSP had an outstanding warrant out on Prescott for "molesting vegetation in a state park." Specifically, he and a buddy had ripped up saplings while drunk.

Cooper's office was at the rear of the building, where it adjoined the state forestry and

fish and wildlife offices. His window looked out upon the city park, named Pioneer Park the same as the parks in Prineville and Bend were named, and famed throughout Central Oregon for its tall, thick, wide blue spruces. The window behind Cooper's desk looked out upon these huge trees, and that gave his office more of a forestry atmosphere than a police atmosphere.

When Austin entered he found Cooper seated behind his desk glaring at a shaggy-haired fellow in his late twenties. The contrast was almost amusing. Cooper as usual sat in a spotless, pressed blue uniform, his black boots reflecting the images around them; the other man wore a plaid shirt that looked as if it had been slept in, threadbare pre-faded jeans, and scruffy old grey logging boots. Cooper had a crewcut; the other man's greasy brown hair fell over his collar.

"Hey, what's going on?" asked the young man when Austin walked in. "If you're charging me with breaking any county laws—or with doing anything other than pulling up those stupid trees—I wanna see my lawyer."

"Sheriff, this is Keith Prescott," said Cooper. "Keith, Sheriff Austin."

"Keith," said Austin, nodding.

Prescott didn't respond. His grey eyes stared at Austin suspiciously. His sharp, thin face showed no friendliness at all.

Austin seated himself in a chair that allowed him to face both Prescott and Cooper.

"Now, Keith," said Cooper, and Prescott turned to face him again, "I want to know about last night."

"Last night? What about last night?"

"Where were you last night, Keith?"

"Hey, what's going on? What's last night got to do with anything? What're you badge-heavy bluebellies trying to pin on me now?"

"We're not trying to pin anything on you. We're just trying to get some answers. Right now, you're not even a suspect. You might become one later, and that's why I read you your Miranda, but that's only if we have a lot more cause to think you're guilty of something than we do now. So, cooperate, and everything'll be okay."

"Screw you, Coop. I wanna see my lawyer."

Cooper's face reddened. For a moment Austin thought he'd jump Prescott, and apparently Prescott feared the same thing because he braced himself, but the sergeant managed to restrain himself. Cooper shoved his phone toward Prescott.

"Go ahead and call him," said Cooper. "Tell him we got you for molesting vegetation and we may book you for first degree murder."

Prescott had reached for the phone, but froze when Cooper mentioned murder. He sat immobile, his left hand outstretched and his mouth and eyes widened.

"M-murder?" said Prescott. "Are you kidding?"

"We're not kidding," said Austin, feeling that adding his own voice to the proceedings would increase Prescott's intimidation. "We've got a murder and we're looking right at you."

Prescott forgot about the phone. "Ain't so," he said, turning to face Austin. "I ain't never killed nobody."

"Where were you last night?" demanded Cooper.

"Last night? I was—let me think, let me think . . ."

"Stop stalling," snapped Austin.

"I ain't. I ain't stalling. I just—I can't remember. Let me think. I'm all mixed up. Murder! Who was killed?"

"We'll ask the questions," said Cooper. "The question we want answered right now is where were you last night?"

Prescott turned to face Cooper. "Last night I—I was with Hazel. That's it. I'd forgotten. Ha-

zel Younger, Mitchell Route Road. Ask her, Coop. I was there from eight until late this morning. Ask her."

"You sure it was last night?" asked Cooper. "You sure all that methamphetamine you take hasn't got you so confused you're not mistaking two weeks ago for last night?"

"Yeah, I'm sure." Prescott, sweating, began to relax almost immediately. "You ask Hazel, Coop. She'll tell you."

Suddenly Prescott grabbed the phone. He took off the receiver and dialed a number from memory. Austin assumed that he was calling Hazel Younger, but when he spoke it became obvious he'd called his lawyer. He asked the man's secretary or receptionist to send him down to the OSP office as soon as he returned because "old Snooper Cooper is down here stomping all over my rights."

After Prescott hung up, he looked across Cooper's desk in a manner now calm. "Who was killed?" he asked again.

"Scott Moncreiffe," said the sergeant.

A smile flowed slowly across the young man's face. "Scott Moncreiffe, huh? Well, well, well, what do you know? Someone finally plugged the bastard. I can't say I'm sorry, Coop, but I didn't do it. Almost wish that

I had. Almost. But shit, man, murder . . . murder is trouble, Coop. You know how much trouble murder is, Coop? Seven or even eight years in the stinking state penitentiary, that's how much trouble murder is. If you think Keith Prescott is dumb enough to give up eight years of his life over a bastard like Scott Moncreiffe, you're even dumber than everyone says you are."

Cooper pulled his phone back, lifted the receiver, and dialed. He asked someone for the police chief. When the man came on, Cooper said he had a prisoner to lodge in a city cell until bail could be posted or arrangements made to transport him to Pendleton. When Cooper said that the charge was "molesting vegetation," Austin could hear laughter on the other end. Apparently so could Prescott, who began giggling.

Five minutes later Austin was rushing across the street, intent upon reaching Hazel Younger before Prescott's lawyer could spring him, which would allow Prescott to phone her and tell her what to say.

Austin was halfway across the street when he saw the county planning director hurrying down the sidewalk. Elaine Osgood, a thirty-nine-year-old

redhead with freckles and enormous glasses, waved to him. The wave was quick because even though she wore a long blue raincoat and a plastic head scarf she was being soaked by the rain.

Austin ran toward her.

She stopped, waited to see what he wanted.

"Do you know where Mitchell Route Road is?" he asked her.

"Sure. It's just off Highway 26 near—"

"Never mind explaining. I've got to get there fast and don't have time to get lost. Can you come along and show me?"

"Uh, well—"

"Good. Come on, there's not a second to lose."

A minute later Austin was guiding his Bronco II through the streets of Sawyerville toward U.S. 26. Traffic was light. Soon he turned onto the Sawyerville street that became the highway at the city limits, switched on his overhead lights, and shot forward, weaving in and out of what traffic existed.

"Not too fast," said Elaine.

"I was surprised to see you working on a Saturday."

"It's that appeal on the Greenbrier subdivision plan. Five public hearings before the county planning commission, then the developer appeals their decision to the county executive commission. He doesn't stand

a chance. But we've got to have transcripts of all that testimony ready in time for the county commissioners to read it before they hold the hearing. What a mess."

Austin passed the city limits. A glance at his speedometer told him he was now traveling seventy-five mph. He depressed the accelerator further until the needle reached ninety.

"I saw a mess this morning," said Austin. "An old subdivision out on the Moncreiffe ranch."

"Oh, you mean 'Sun Empire Estates.' I've seen it. But it was platted long before my time, Leo. In fact, that so-called subdivision was put in before the state had any real zoning laws."

"I never saw anything quite like it before."

"Central Oregon has several like it. Most of those sagebrush subdivisions never got past the lot sales stage."

The dispatcher called for "four-oh-one," and Austin answered. Two seconds later Cooper was talking.

"He's talked to his lawyer," said Cooper without identifying on the air who "he" was. "Our boy's still in the clink, but I wouldn't put it past this particular lawyer to call the guy's girlfriend for him."

"I'm hurrying," said Austin. "Hurry faster."

Austin signed off, accelerated the Bronco II to one hundred.

"The promoters of Sun Empire Estates promised nearby fishing, golf, tennis, the works," said Elaine, her eyes glancing continually at the speedometer. "All they sold was a half acre of desert for one hundred dollars. That was a high price then. Today it'd be a thousand. There were buyers from about forty states and several foreign countries. Lots with A.P.O. addresses. It couldn't have happened after the laws were changed in the early seventies."

"What happened to the suckers?"

"Most realized eventually that they'd been cheated. Certainly they did if they ever came for a visit. They stopped paying taxes. The county foreclosed on the lots, then eventually Scott Moncreiffe bought them to graze cattle on. It sounds wasteful—grazing cattle on a platted subdivision—but that place was a subdivision in name only. It's hardly worth anything as grazing land."

"You heard about Scott Moncreiffe?" asked Austin.

"Yeah. I've met him on a number of occasions. He seemed like a nice man."

For five minutes neither of them spoke.

Then Elaine pointed to a

turnoff. Austin made it, and was on Mitchell Route Road.

Another five minutes found him pulling up in the front drive of a small house. The house sat about two hundred feet from the road, a small, old, green single story affair in bad need of paint and shingles. A sign in front said YOUNGER.

A German shepherd ran barking up to the Bronco II. It ran alongside the vehicle all the way to the front of the house. The dog then ran loops around it, barking and biting. When the vehicle stopped, the big dog jumped against the door repeatedly, trying to get at the occupants. Austin cut the engine and blew the horn.

The house's front door opened, and a young woman appeared in it. She stood looking at the visitors from there, apparently too wary of the leaks in the porch roof to step out. Austin could see only that she was blonde, thin, and dressed in a white sweatshirt and blue-jeans. He knew that from where she stood she could see his overhead lights and would know that his was an official vehicle of some sort.

The woman shouted something. The dog stopped barking, took several steps toward her, then turned back to the Bronco and started barking again. The woman yelled again. The dog

turned, ran to the door, and entered the house.

Austin opened his door and got out, keeping a wary eye on the house for the dog's possible reappearance.

He trudged to the front door, the mud grabbing his boots at every step. His wide-brim hat kept the rain out of his face, although at this elevation wind was blowing.

"Hazel Younger?" asked Austin. The woman standing in the doorway nodded. "I'm Sheriff Austin. I would like to talk to you for a few minutes."

Five seconds passed before she answered. "Sure. Come on in."

Hazel stood back while Austin walked through the door, where he found himself facing the bared teeth and growling, tense, muscular body of the German shepherd.

"Stop that, Sherm," Hazel told the dog. "Get outside. Go on, get out."

The dog marched out the door, staring murderously at Austin as it passed him.

"Pardon the looks of the place," said Hazel. "I ain't had no time to clean house this week."

The room smelled of unwashed linen and wet dog. Except for the large television set and VCR, the furniture was old and worn and dusty. Two pans

on the floor caught water leaking from the ceiling. The dripping, the steady drum of rain against the windows and roof, and the soft metallic noises made by the yellow parakeet as it moved around inside its large cage were noticeable only after Hazel turned off the television.

"Have a seat?" said Hazel, nodding toward the lumpy sofa.

"No, thanks. I'll only be a few minutes."

"Suit yourself." She walked to the armchair that faced the television and sat down. Austin noticed now that although she was shapely she had a homely face and wore soiled clothes. Her face looked devoid of makeup, although her fingernails were crimson. "What can I help you with?"

"Mr. Keith Prescott is being questioned about an event that occurred last night. He says he was here at the time of the event."

Hazel nodded. "From eight until late this morning," she said.

Austin recognized the words she spoke as the same Prescott had uttered in Cooper's office. Word for word. If Prescott had arrived at precisely eight and stayed until an obscure time late this morning, perhaps this was coincidence. Austin doubted that it was.

"Has Keith phoned you this

afternoon, Miss Younger?"

"No."

"What time this morning did he leave?"

Hazel shrugged. "Damned if I know. Sometime late this morning's all I can tell you. You'll have to ask Keith."

"I see. And you can verify that he was here from eight until late this morning? I mean, he couldn't have been gone for a half hour or an hour or longer."

She shook her head, playing with the hair near her right ear using the fingers of her right hand. "We were together the whole time, sheriff. And part of the time really together, if you get my drift."

"I see."

"You sound skeptical. You needn't be. I like Keith, but not enough to lie to the police for him."

"I'm sure you're too bright to make yourself an accessory after the fact by lying during a murder investigation."

She paled. "Murder! He didn't say you were holding him for murder."

"So he did call."

She stiffened. "You tricked me."

"We're investigating a murder," said Austin. "I'm not tricking you. A man named Scott Moncreiffe."

"Moncreiffe. Keith always talked about how he was

gonna . . . You're really on the level? I mean about Moncreiffe getting killed and Keith being questioned for it."

Austin nodded.

"And it happened last night?" asked Hazel.

Austin nodded again.

"Well," she said, "Keith wasn't here. He phoned a few minutes ago, said the police would be asking where he was and he'd been home alone without an alibi, so I should say he was here. But he wasn't."

Cooper arrived at Austin's office shortly after eight that night. Nash was already there.

The rain had stopped shortly after six, then resumed at seven thirty. Weather reports indicated it would be more or less steady until early Sunday, intermittent through the day, and cease Monday morning. For now, though, it continued to make its presence known by its steady drumming upon the roof.

"Let's start off by reviewing where we stand with each of our three major suspects," said Austin. He was seated at his small desk, turned around to face Cooper and Nash because the desk itself faced the wall. Cooper and Nash were seated in visitors' chairs. "First, Keith Prescott."

"Released on bond this after-

noon," said Cooper. "We didn't tell him that Hazel Younger had refused to confirm his alibi, for her safety. We told him not to talk to her while the investigation was under way, but tried to sound like we didn't want them comparing notes. We checked with neighbors. There's the weak link in a case against Prescott."

"How so?" asked Austin.

"Prescott has only one motor vehicle, a 1974 Chevy pickup truck. A neighbor says it was parked in front of Prescott's house last night at least until eleven o'clock. The neighbor knows this because he kept looking out his own window to see if the rain was letting up and could see Prescott's pickup parked under the street light. The neighbor went to bed at eleven. He said that the last time he looked out, the pickup truck was still by the curb and Prescott's house lights were still on."

"That does help Prescott," said Austin. "What do we have on Garroway?"

Nash extracted a small wire-bound notebook from his shirt pocket. He flipped through the pages for several seconds until he found what he sought.

"We found two tires in the trunk of Garroway's 1985 Plymouth, the car he claims he drove last night. The Garro-

ways have another car, a 1983 Lincoln, and a pickup truck, a 1980 GMC half-ton. The two tires were both flat, one from a nail in it and the other through wear. One of the tires on the Plymouth was studded. Studded tires, of course, are legal in Oregon during this season of the year, but since we've had no snow here and damned little in the mountains, it's unusual for anyone to have studded tires on. When anyone does put them on, they naturally put on two or four, never one or three. Garroway's other tires were normal all-weather radials."

Nash closed his notebook.

"What about Velma Moncreiffe?" asked Austin.

"Dick watched KOIN-TV news last night," said Cooper, mentioning the name of another OSP officer. "He confirms Velma Moncreiffe's recollection of it. A trooper in Bend watched Johnny Carson and David Letterman and he confirms her memories of them, including the jokes she recalled."

"In other words," said Nash, "everyone has a good alibi even though every suspect was alone last night."

"Did you check local stores to discover if any of them sold a VCR to Velma Moncreiffe during the last few months?" asked Austin.

"Yes," said Nash. "None had."

"We contacted stores in Prineville, Redmond, Mitchell, Madras, John Day, and even Bend," said Cooper. "No VCR sold to Velma Moncreiffe."

"Yet she said that she was a TV fan who liked both *Dallas* and *Miami Vice*," observed Austin. "Too bad we don't know who's been in her house since she rented or bought it. Someone might have seen a VCR there before she came up with her scheme to use it for an alibi."

"You think it's her," said Nash. "Why?"

Austin paused for a minute before he answered. He thought about how Scott Moncreiffe had been killed on a lonely stretch of highway between his ranch and Sawyerville. He thought about the motives of each suspect. He thought about the alibis of each suspect.

"Who else could it have been?" said Austin at last. "If it was Garroway, he'd have to recruit his whole family to lie for him, after he did an elaborate switch with the tires on his Plymouth. If it was Prescott, he would have to figure out a way to get from his house to that stretch of road without using his own vehicle, and then get home again. But all Velma Moncreiffe needed was a VCR."

"Which she doesn't have," said Cooper.

"Which we can't *prove* she has—or had. But let's assume for a moment that the murder was premeditated, which it probably was. If you planned to kill someone, and you wanted to use television programs as your only proof of innocence, wouldn't some extra effort be worthwhile?"

Cooper and Nash waited for Austin to continue when he paused.

"What I'm saying," said Austin, "is that she could've driven all the way to Portland or Spokane or Seattle to buy that VCR, then used it that one time, planning to throw it down a mountainside or something. Murder—especially for high stakes—is worth an investment in the cost of gas and a VCR."

No one spoke for a minute. The only sounds were cars splashing past outside, rain drumming on the roof, a deputy typing one-key-at-a-time in the next room on an old manual, and the electric heater buzzing softly on the floor near the wall.

"If you're right," said Cooper at last, "she's tossed that VCR by now. We'll never prove it, unless she paid for it by check or bank card."

"She's not that stupid," said Nash. "She would've paid cash, assuming Leo's theory is right."

Cooper nodded, then looked at Austin again. "What's this

about murder 'for high stakes'?" he asked. "Even if she inherited the entire Shotgun Creek Hereford Ranch instead of taking him in court for half its value, it's still hardly worth murdering him for. The kids'll fight her all the way. By the time she's shelled out several years' worth of dough to the lawyers, she'll have less than she would've had if she settled for community property."

"Wrong—but there's no time to explain now. I think that VCR is still at Velma Moncreiffe's house. I think so because she's had no time to get rid of it."

"A full day," interjected Nash.

Austin shook his head. "Let's say Scott Moncreiffe was killed at ten o'clock last night, Conroy. Since you saw him at nine thirty, that's a reasonable assumption. Let's say Velma killed him. It would take her more than a half hour to get home, meaning that she probably arrived between ten forty and eleven. In short, she'd missed both *Dallas* and *Falcon Crest* and had to view the tapes of both programs."

"Which would've taken her till one," said Cooper. "Then she could've driven out and hid or thrown away the VCR."

"Wrong. Velma didn't know what time we would select as the time of death. She had to cover herself fully. Remember,

she knew the plots of both those programs, but also knew what was said on the eleven o'clock news, on the Carson show, and on *Late Night*. She watched that television from the time she arrived home until one thirty. She couldn't view the tape of *Dallas* and *Falcon Crest* until she was through watching the other programs. That means that she was watching television until three thirty."

"You're right," said Nash. "But then she could've driven out and hid the VCR."

"She had to assume that her husband's body might be found by that time. What if we called or came to her house at three thirty and she wasn't home? No, she remained put until I arrived."

"She's had all the time since then," said Nash.

"She wouldn't dare do it this soon. She probably thinks we're watching her house, and we probably should be. I think she has a VCR in her house or within a hundred feet of it."

"We need a search warrant," said Cooper, rising to his feet.

"No." Austin lifted his telephone receiver. "All we need is this."

Austin pushed the button that lit up the luminous dial of his wristwatch: 11:09.

"I've been thinking," said

Nash, who squatted beside him behind the thick trunk of an old Ponderosa pine tree. "If one of us stayed here with a handheld, the other two could return to the cars and wait. Then, when Velma Moncreiffe steps out of her house—if she ever does—he could signal us with the radio and we could rush back up here."

The cars were parked half a mile away, off the road on a trail amid the pines. That was as close to Velma's house as Austin, Nash, and Cooper dared come, lest she see their headlights. They'd trudged through the rain the half mile to the trees across the road from the house. Austin and Nash had remained facing the house while Cooper had circled to the trees on the right side in order to watch her back door.

"Forget it," said Austin. "We gotta be ready if she makes a move."

"I still think Cooper was right; we should've gotten a search warrant."

"That would've only covered the house, Conroy. She might have hid it in her car or in the trees on any side of the house."

Nash groaned, shifted his weight to try to make himself more comfortable. But it was hard for a heavy man in his fifties to find comfort squatting behind a tree during a rainstorm.

Austin himself was drenched and achey. Watching the distant squares of yellow light that were Velma's windows, with black night and sheets of rain all around, he was particularly anxious to return home. He could picture himself in his mind's eye with his feet up in front of the fireplace, listening to his records or the easy listening FM station, his bulldog Wellington at his feet, a mystery novel in his hands.

"Hey," whispered Nash.

Austin, alerted, focused upon the house.

Light from a now open front door illuminated the sidewalk and lawn.

Seconds later Velma rushed out wearing a dark raincoat and a plastic raincap. She hurried up the sidewalk, across the highway, in Austin's direction.

"She must've seen us," whispered Nash.

"Not possible. Stay still—and quiet."

Velma reached the edge of the highway, only ten feet from where Austin and Nash squatted with held breaths. Then she ran twenty feet up the highway to an old deer trail that led to the top of the hill. She turned onto it, disappearing amid the trees.

"Should we follow her?" whispered Nash.

"No. She might see us. Besides, we want to catch her with

the evidence. We'll wait."

Austin hoped that Cooper wouldn't call them on his handheld. As close as Velma appeared to be, she might hear the hollow sound of his voice coming from the radio.

Cooper didn't call.

Five minutes passed in suspense, anticipation, and hope, when finally Velma reappeared at the same place she had disappeared. She moved slowly now, weighted down by what she carried. She was too far away for Austin to see what she did hold in her arms, but he decided that the time had come to move in.

He spoke into the handheld: "Here we go, Walt."

Austin and Nash rose from their hiding place and made a beeline for Velma. Even when they were clear of the forest she failed to see them, being too intent upon getting her burden home. Nor did she appear to see Cooper, who'd emerged from the trees on their right. She reached the other side of the highway and hurried down the sidewalk, picking up speed now that she was close to her goal.

Austin moved faster, too, fearful that she might somehow escape them although knowing that this was now impossible. He was only thirty feet from her when she reached her car, laid down what she carried, and

stuck a key into the trunk lock.

Suddenly she whirled around, looking wide-eyed at Austin and Nash. Then she noticed Cooper, only fifteen feet to one side.

Velma grabbed up one of the objects she'd been carrying.

Austin drew his own Smith and Wesson, shouted: "Freeze!"

Nash and Cooper drew their guns, aimed at Velma.

She hesitated momentarily, then allowed her rifle to fall onto the driveway with a dull thud.

The officers moved in on her slowly, carefully.

Velma waited. Her face showed no emotion. She didn't look angry, didn't look sad, didn't look relieved, didn't look happy. Nothing. She just watched them slowly approach with their pistols pointed at her.

Cooper cuffed her while Nash read her the Miranda rights again. Then Cooper hurried down the highway to fetch his car.

Lying on the driveway below the open trunk were a Remington rifle and an Emerson VCR.

"When you phoned you said you'd arrested Prescott for murdering Scott," Velma told Austin. "You lied to me."

"It's allowed," said Austin.

"I should've gone slower. I was so worried that someone

might come across those things, even though I hid them real well last night. I wanted to take them up in the Blue Mountains and bury them in some obscure spot where they would never be found. . . . How did you know it was me?"

"Two reasons. The other two suspects had old hatreds for your husband. Nothing new had happened that would cause them to be angrier at him than they'd been before. Second, you had the only really good motive, and that was the big money you would make from Sun Empire Estates."

"Sun Empire Estates!" said Nash. "That fraudulent development has been out of business for almost twenty years."

"But it needn't have been . . . right, Mrs. Moncreiffe? That *was* the problem you had with your husband's determination to remain a rancher, right? You wanted to start selling those lots again."

"Yes."

"But it ain't a subdivision now," persisted Nash. "It's part of a cattle ranch."

"You're forgetting about grandfather clauses," said Austin. "Sun Empire Estates was incorporated and platted before the zoning laws became tough. Since it was already a platted subdivision, it's not subject to those zoning laws. In other

words, Mrs. Moncreiffe here could have settled with Scott Moncreiffe's children out of court, allowing them to have the actual ranch in return for her receiving the old subdivision. Then she would start selling its lots by mail again. And, because the subdivision wasn't subject to new zoning requirements, she wouldn't have had to install water, sewer, paved roads, or anything else. She'd have netted hundreds of thousands of dollars."

Velma smiled. "Couldn't we wait for that trooper's car inside the house, sheriff? It's awfully wet out here."

They walked inside. The living room had a blaze burning in the fireplace. Its warmth, coupled with the rain streaking the windows, made the room especially comfortable.

"I thought it would be worth gambling four or five years of my life to get that kind of money," said Velma, seating herself on the arm of an overstuffed chair. "I planned it so well, though, that I honestly thought I wouldn't be caught."

"Murder usually brings seven or eight years, not four or five."

"Ah, but I'm a woman, sheriff. Even these days courts are easier on women murderers than men murderers, are they not?"

"You showed cold, calculating cunning when you killed your husband in order to get land to cheat other people," said Austin. "The judge is no fool. You'll be lucky to be out in eight."

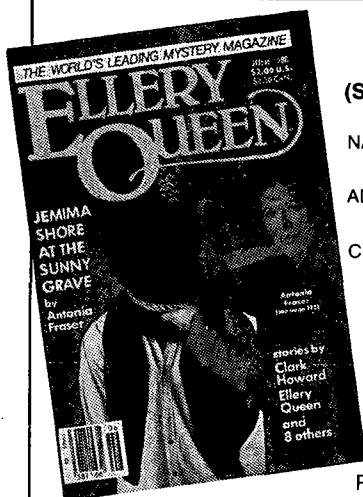
"Well..." she said with a shrug, "for the amount of money I could've made, it was

still worth the gamble."

After she said this, Velma looked around the room slowly, her eyes lingering over the chairs and sofa and coffee table and fireplace. When she saw the television set, her eyes closed and the muscles in her neck tightened.

"I need a cigarette," she said.

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DHG8Q-0

UNSOLVED

by Guy Savant

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the August issue.

All four vice-presidents of Solvme, Inc., had good cause to kill the president, Vic Timm, but only one had the nerve to do it. One stormy afternoon the four vice-presidents were seated at the long conference table, two on each side with the president at the head, ready for the weekly review. Suddenly, lightning flashed, and the lights went out.

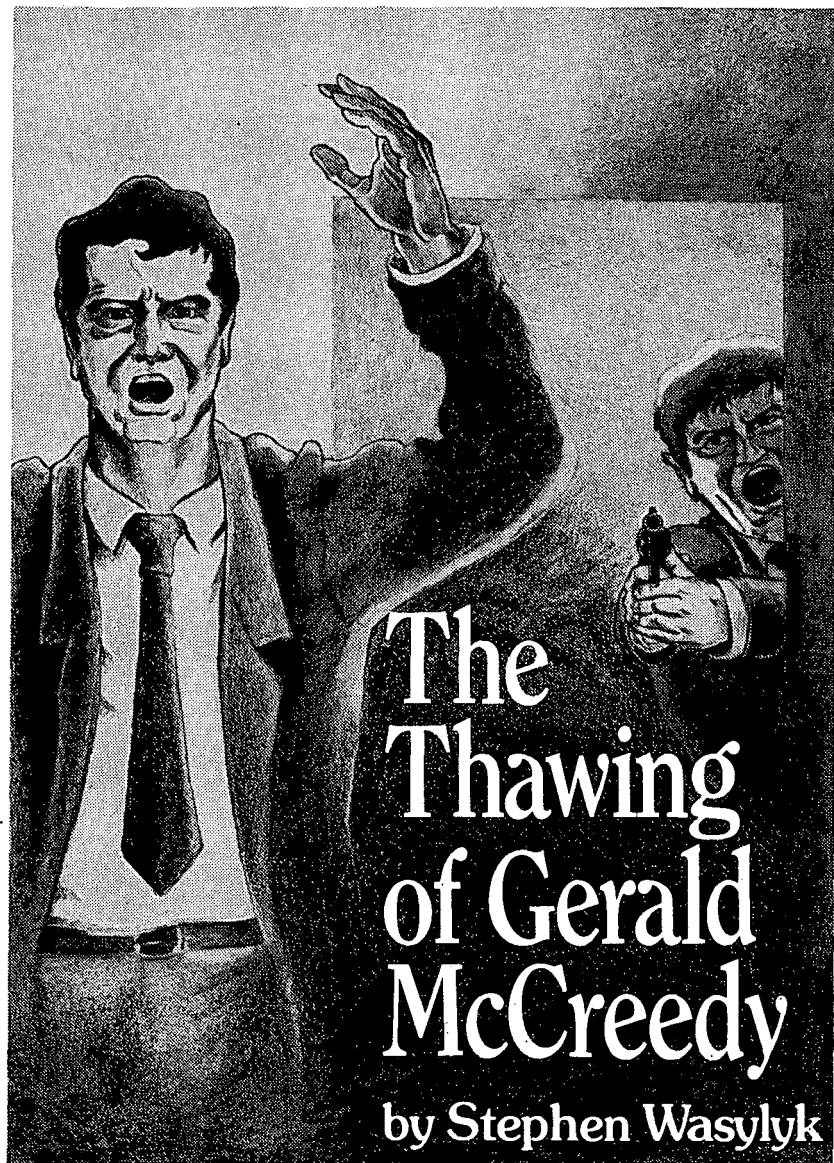
There was some startled, confused commotion, and when the lights came back on, Vice-President Shoote was standing by the light switch, the Vice-President of Finance was over by the window, the other two vice-presidents were still in their seats on the east side of the table—and President Vic Timm was dead in his chair.

From the following clues, can you determine what department each vice-president headed, who committed the murder, and why?

1. Vice-President Smothers sat to the right of the Vice-President of Marketing and across from the vice-president who might have killed for money.
2. Vice-President Stabb, who would not have killed for power, sat to the left of the vice-president who would have killed for jealousy.
3. The murderer sat beside the Vice-President of General Operations.
4. The vice-president who might have killed for revenge did not sit next to the vice-president who might have killed for jealousy, who sat on the left side of the president, nor across from the vice-president who turned on the lights.
5. Afraid of heights, Vice-President Strangel never went near the window, and so instead remained seated directly across from the Vice-President of Production.

See page 149 for the solution to the June puzzle.

FICTION



The man staring with dead eyes at the dirty gray concrete of the basement ceiling was about fifty, brown hair thinning, body thick with fat, his face round. His dark blue business suit was splotted with dust, the designer tie askew, the expensive shirt open at the collar. He'd been shot once, very close, in the center of the chest.

We knelt beside the body, McCreedy's eyes taking inventory from the top of the man's head to the tips of his toes. I had the eerie feeling that he could communicate with the dead, that the corpse was speaking to him.

The captain leaned back in his chair, propped a knee covered with stone-washed denim against his desk and scratched his left ear slowly. The Secretary of State couldn't have looked more thoughtful about another Soviet incursion somewhere in the world.

"I've paired you with McCreedy. The Iceman and Stoneman. I think a little touch of humor enriches all our lives, don't you?"

"I'm not laughing."

"Better get in at least one chuckle, Stoneman. People who work with McCreedy have been known never to laugh again."

I stepped back. A policeman stood at the head of the concrete

basement stairs, sealing us in and the curious out. Beyond the body, the basement stretched into darkness, huge boilers looming in the fringe of the light. Here and there, the cement coating had fallen from the bricks of the wall, leaving mangy red patches, particularly around the wide doors of a freight elevator.

McCreedy rose and joined a police sergeant. "Get an I.D., Delaney?"

"He's a tenant. Lars Thorson. Has an office upstairs, T&J Imports. His partner's name is Jarret and I had him identify the body. Since he'd only be in the way here, he's waiting in the office, one of my men with him. There's also a niece of the victim up there. She confirmed the identification."

"Who found the body?"

"The building super, Simon Latinsky." The sergeant crooked an index finger. "Tell him about it, Simon."

A short, heavy man wearing an unbuttoned denim shirt over a dirty T-shirt stepped forward.

"There's a small loading dock at the back of the building. I was on my way there to open the door for a delivery when I noticed streaks in the dust on the floor leading to the basement, as if something had been dragged. I sure as hell hadn't put them there so I followed

them down here and found Mr. Thorson." The super pointed. "You can still see the streaks. After he was killed, the guy must have been pulled to the head of the stairs and pushed down. I'll tell you something, lieutenant. A week ago, we had another tenant mugged out on that loading dock. They park out there in the alley and use the loading dock door to get to their cars. Telling them they shouldn't do that is like talking to the wall. Once you step through the corridor door and that big overhead door to the street is down you're isolated. No one can see you or hear you if you yell. That's why no one heard the shot. I figure Mr. Thorson was going out that way, ran into someone who shot him, took his wallet, and dragged him down here."

"Simon could be right, McCreedy," said Delaney. "While we were waiting, one of the boys found an empty shell up there. He's standing over it to be sure it isn't touched or moved."

McCreedy nodded to the photographer. "Go up and get shots of those streaks and that shell." He spun on the forensic man.

"Time of death?"

"Sometime before lunch."

"When you strip him, call me with a reading on that stain on the left elbow. I don't think he

picked it up when he was dragged."

The stain had meant nothing to me. "Why?"

"Dust is black. The stain is brown and has to be fresh. A man who can afford custom clothes wouldn't wear a suit with a stain. Let's go upstairs and see what else we can learn." He placed a hand on the super's shoulder. "I want you with me, Simon."

I'd heard about the *I* and *me*. First person singular was a trademark that irritated the hell out of many of his partners.

The captain had a full head of wavy white hair, the body of a twenty-two-year-old fitness fanatic, and wore the same type of clothes. He looked like one of those middle-aged asses trying to recapture youth, but underneath that white thatch was a brain that scared the hell out of everyone, including the brass, which was why they never sent around a memo ordering all captains to wear suits, starched shirts, and ties.

He leaned forward and laced his fingers. "I'll tell you why I want you to work with him. You've probably heard that McCreedy can get you killed. Not true. But he can get himself killed. Keep your eye on him."

I wasn't sure I bought his concern for McCreedy. The captain and the Iceman were as com-

patible as a left wing fanatic and a right wing nut and McCreedy was rumored to be as smart as the captain was. Two people like that in one division were frightening when everyone else was grouped somewhere around the normal intelligence percentile and were a threat to no one except themselves.

If the captain looked like an undercover vice cop who had been run through an automatic car wash, McCreedy looked like a corporation executive who had wandered in while looking for the men's room. His hair was black and straight and his face could have come off the statue of St. George in the park, the only difference being that the statue had no eyes and McCreedy's were the color and temperature of a Greenland glacier.

He was a solitary man, somehow different, always standing a little apart. His partner expected, he was always courteous and accommodating to everyone. And completely disinterested, giving the impression that he wouldn't blink an eye if they disappeared before his eyes. He wasn't popular, but he sure as hell was respected because no matter what you ran into, he was always out front; cool, calm, and collected. The Iceman.

The loading dock area was exactly what Simon said it was; a dimly lighted, isolated cubicle, sealed off from the street by a corrugated metal door and a smaller steel door beside it. Another door on the long leg of the L-shaped platform led to the first floor corridor. The battered doors of the freight elevator and a short flight of stairs to ground level were at the end of the short leg.

A patrolman leaned against the platform at the crook of the L.

"The shell is at his feet," said Delaney.

McCreedy nodded, pushed open the smaller door, and examined the outside of it. "Need a key to get in, but not to get out, Simon?"

"That's the way it works."

"Then how did the killer get in?"

"Easy enough. Nothing to stop him from coming in from the front and down the corridor. All he had to do then was wait. If I showed up, he'd have just taken off through the door."

"Maybe he'd have mugged you."

"Not likely. None of these bums would take me on one to one, especially since I carry a hammer in my belt."

"The hammer wouldn't be much good against a gun," I said.

"Yeah, well, they usually don't carry guns. This guy must have been crazier than the rest."

The photographer was leaning against the platform. I raised my eyebrows at him. He nodded.

I scooped up the shell with my pencil, held it up to the dim light, placed it in an envelope, and handed it to the forensic man.

"Nine millimeter, McCreedy."

McCreedy spun slowly, surveying the loading area.

"When they want to go out this way, they come down on the freight elevator, don't they, Simon?"

"The ones in the rear of the building do, like Thorson. His office is right next to it. Why should he walk to the front and then back again?"

McCreedy took the photographer's arm and gently pulled him into position.

"I want one from this angle, with the elevator doors in the background. Then you can go." He turned to Delaney. "I'm going up to talk to the partner. What's his name again?"

"Jarret. And if you don't need my man, tell him to come down and see me. I guess you'll want us to make a quick canvass of the neighborhood to see if anyone noticed anything."

"I'd appreciate it."

"I'll take you up," said Simon. "If you're not used to them, these elevator gates can cost you a finger."

The office was to the right, a worn and scarred wooden floored hallway leading to the front of the building. The frosted glass door was lettered with T&J IMPO TS in black, the decal had gone.

The young patrolman seated on the desk in the reception room came to his feet when they entered. "Do you need me, lieutenant?"

"No, but Delaney does," said McCreedy.

A middle-aged woman who heard the voices appeared. A little too heavy for the high fashion clothes and the wind-tousled hair styling, she dabbed a small handkerchief at red-rimmed eyes that wouldn't have helped anyone's appearance.

McCreedy held up his I.D. folder and introduced himself.

"I'd like to see Mr. Jarret."

Even though he was as smart as the captain, McCreedy was still a lieutenant because the promotion board liked to use words like "caring" and "sensitive" and "social consciousness," words that ricocheted off his hide like high powered slugs off armor plate. Maybe they were right. He not only always used "I" and "me," but never introduced his partner, an oversight

which endeared him to no one.

The woman nodded. "He's been expecting someone from the police."

She disappeared into one of the offices to reappear and beckon.

The general seediness of the building had eased when we stepped into the reception room. It disappeared completely when we went into the office. Paneled, softly lit, and carpeted, it was as out of place in this building as a Rolls would be, parked at the curb in this neighborhood.

The bull-like man behind the desk was short, his neck thick, his face round, and his head almost bald.

"A terrible tragedy," he said. "Is there anything I can do to help find the person who did this?"

"Sergeant Delaney explained where the body was found and what he thought might have happened?" asked McCreedy.

Jarret nodded. "I told Lars many times that it was foolhardy to leave the building that way, but he was a stubborn man."

A door at the side of the office opened and a young woman stepped through. Some attractive women like to sweep into a room, any room, like a sudden squall. This one entered more like a warm, gentle wind.

The graven image quality of

McCreedy's face softened. I could understand why. Like anyone who pursued beauty in the museums and concert halls of the city, he appreciated it when he saw it.

Jarret introduced her like a courtier announcing the queen. "Mr. Thorson's niece, Julia."

She was as tall as McCreedy, long, dark hair parted in the center and reaching her shoulders; her face oval. Grief was in her eyes but, unlike the older woman, whatever tears she had inside would be shed when she was alone.

"Miss Thorson is in town for only a short time. She's our European representative and was to return next week. This is Lieutenant McCreedy, Julia, and his partner—"

"Detective Stoneman," said McCreedy.

He was probably too stunned to realize he'd said it.

The young woman held out her hand. Surprised, McCreedy took it and held it as if he didn't know what to do with it.

I turned my head away so they couldn't see me smile. *The Iceman's reserve had been broken.*

Julia Thorson's voice was low, with a slight accent. "I hope you find the person who did this terrible thing, lieutenant."

McCreedy released her hand. "We try, but sometimes we don't

succeed. What I'd like to know is whether there is any possibility that this is not the result of a mugging or stickup, or if Mr. Thorson had any enemies who might possibly want to see him dead."

Julia Thorson shook her head. "He had no enemies."

"That's true," said Jarret. "He had no enemies."

The niece had moved to Jarret's side, leaving the doorway she had come through clear. Through it, I could see an office almost identical to Jarret's.

"Where was he going when he left?" asked McCreedy.

I walked through the doorway as the niece said, "To have lunch with me. When he was late, I called here. Mr. Jarret told me what happened."

The polished desktop was bare except for a phone and a framed photo of a woman with just a trace of a haughty smile. I felt the presence of the secretary at my elbow. "Mrs. Thorson?"

"Yes. She died a little more than a year ago."

The way she said it told me she hadn't cared for Mrs. Thorson.

The empty desk bothered me.

"Mr. Thorson didn't expect to return after lunch?"

"No. He was flying to Houston on business."

The sun slanted through the window and reflected off the

polished surface of the bare desktop. Jarret's had been cluttered with papers. Flying to Houston or not, either Thorson had been the neatest executive in town or someone had cleaned off his desk.

"Was Miss Thorson going with him?"

Pressed to her lips, the handkerchief muffled the *no*.

I took her arm. "Maybe you'd better sit down. Can I get you anything?"

She smiled weakly. "I'll be all right, but I was making myself a drink when you arrived. If you don't mind—"

I followed her to a room alongside Thorson's office. The room was just as handsome as the offices, one wall lined with glass-doored cases facing a soft sofa, a coffee table, and two chairs. Folding doors at the far end had been opened, revealing a small bar with a selection of wines and liquors, a coffee maker, and a small hotplate.

"Sit down," I said. "I'll get it for you. What would you like?"

"Please," she said. "I'll do it. Can I offer you something?"

I smiled. "You can, but regulations say I have to refuse." I slowly walked past the cases, all filled with handsomely displayed china and porcelain. "This is quite nice. For your customers?"

She poured herself a stiff

drink. "It's the only place they can see what we have to offer."

McCreedy and Miss Thorson joined us.

McCreedy sounded annoyed. "Anything more you need?"

I shook my head. "I'm satisfied if you are."

"You will call me, lieutenant," said Miss Thorson.

McCreedy's voice turned warm and reassuring. "Of course."

The Iceman's reserve hadn't been broken. He'd been melted down. Regal, self possessed, Julia Thorson was exactly the type of woman who would impress a man like McCreedy.

He smiled at her. "Thank you for your time."

Jarret appeared. "As I said, anything I can do to help—"

"We'll be in touch." McCreedy closed the door behind us.

"They import china?" asked I.

"Jarret says they handle one of the most exclusive lines, which is why they do so well. Miss Thorson covers the European end, on the lookout for new merchandise."

"I guess it proves you don't need a fancy address to be successful. It occurred to you that Jarret is now the sole owner?"

"If there's one person who didn't want Thorson dead, you just met him. The man is sweat-

ing. He's only the American business partner. The Thorsons are the real experts, and from the way he talks to her, I get the feeling that he's afraid Miss Thorson will pull out now that her uncle is out of the picture. He needs her but she doesn't need him."

Simon opened the elevator doors. "I thought you'd be leaving this way."

On the way down, McCreedy folded his arms. "Tell me what you know about T&J Imports, Simon, and don't tell me you don't know anything."

"You saying I poke my nose into other people's business?"

"The lieutenant sometimes doesn't express himself too well," I said. "He's saying you're the type who not only takes care of the building but everyone in it."

McCreedy looked at me coldly. "I don't need an interpreter."

The super brought the elevator to a bouncing halt. "You two want to argue or hear what I have to say?"

I grinned. "Speak up. We can argue any time."

"Well, there isn't much to tell. They're nice people. Always hand me a check at Christmas, which is more than half the tenants do, and not with the attitude that it's necessary to get good service. The three of them always ask about

my wife and listen, really listen, if I have something to say. And when that goodlooking niece comes over from Paris twice a year, she always brings me a little perfume for the wife."

"Don't tell me everything there is love and kisses," I said. "I have the impression that Miss Eliot couldn't have cried much when Thorson lost his wife."

The super angrily slammed the gates open. "What do you expect from a secretary who loves her boss, although to tell you the truth, I don't know why. With me he was fine, but there were times he treated her like dirt. Still, I expect she was ready to become the second Mrs. Thorson. Now that he's dead, she'll probably just come apart. I feel sorry for her. Besides, why in the hell are you so interested in those people? Go look for the guy who killed Thorson."

I clapped him on the shoulder. "Keep your hammer handy in case he comes back, Simon. The world needs you."

We walked up the alley to look for Delaney. Along one side a string of cars was parked close to the building.

"What did the beautiful niece want you to call her about?"

McCreedy's voice was impatient. "The usual. As the immediate family member, she

has to make all the arrangements. I told her I understood and would help any way I could."

"Naturally."

McCreedy glanced at me coldly. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing. You're known as an extremely helpful person."

"I can do without evaluations of my personality."

"He's abrasive and insulting," the captain said. "Ignore it."

Leaning against a patrol car, Delaney saw us coming.

"Nothing so far, and probably nothing at all."

"Were you on duty when the other tenant was mugged?" asked McCreedy.

"Yeah, but you should see Scott and Fitzkee. They followed it up. The victim gave them a description. There's a bulletin on it back at the district. Don't you guys ever read those things?"

"Only when necessary," I said. "Like now."

We reached the front of the building and our car just as Julia Thorson stepped out of the front door and called, "Lieutenant McCreedy?"

The hint of cosmetics made her look good in the office. The sunlight made her look better, even though she was frowning slightly.

"I was thinking. There is something wrong."

The Iceman's face took on

that soft look I had noticed in the office. "In what respect?"

She shook her head slowly. "I don't know, but I do not think my uncle died the way it appears."

The words usually came from wives and husbands whose spouses had died in places they hadn't known they went to, doing things they hadn't known they did. Sometimes they were right. Most often they were wrong.

"Is there something I should know?"

"No. It is nothing like that. It is that when something happens to someone one loves, one knows when it is not what it seems."

McCreedy stiffened and his face became cold. The Iceman was back. She saw it and, confused, looked at me for help. "Perhaps I am not saying it correctly?"

"You've said it quite well and we'll certainly consider it. Can we drop you anywhere?"

She gave McCreedy a pleading look, as though asking forgiveness. "No, thank you. I have my car."

I waited until she closed her door. "Why the sudden freeze when she said she felt it wasn't the way it appears? Up until then, the two of you were getting along real well."

"I don't like anyone telling me my business," snapped

McCreedy. "And I suggest you mind yours."

I shrugged. "All I know is that she's one attractive woman and the look in her eye says that she wouldn't turn you down if you asked her out to dinner. As for the propriety involved, she loved her uncle but I don't think she's overcome with grief. After all, she saw him only twice a year. But, as you say, it's your business."

McCreedy pulled away, rubber screaming.

We found Scott and Fitzkee in an interrogation room with a long-haired, grimy looking kid who couldn't have been more than eighteen. Scott came out when McCreedy beckoned.

"You covered a mugging at the building at Fourth and Poplar last week and came up with a description. Anything more since then?"

"You psychic or something? The one we have inside may be the guy. Since it was just a simple mugging, we didn't exert ourselves, but there was a call this morning about a purse snatching two blocks from where we were and this kid comes streaking down the street right into our arms. He's not only the snatcher but I'll bet a week's pay he's the mugger. He impresses me as being very versatile. Why?"

"We just came from a killing in the same building. The super

thinks this time the mugger used a gun and dragged the body to the basement. What do you have on the kid?"

"His name's Reynolds and according to his rap sheet, he's never used a weapon. Whatever went on over there, he's out of it. He was too busy snatching a purse."

"Maybe he's versatile enough to do both."

McCreedy walked away.

"How are you getting along with the Iceman?" asked Scott.

"First time out," I said.

"There's a pool on how long you'll put up with him, you know. Do me a favor. Hold out for three weeks. I can use the money."

"Only if you split with me."

I caught up with McCreedy at his desk. "Come off it, McCreedy. This whole thing smells and you know it. No mugger uses a nine millimeter automatic and that kid doesn't have the muscle to drag anything that weighs more than a hundred pounds. You had the photographer take a shot of that shell in relation to the elevator doors because you saw the same thing I did—an automatic ejects to the right and for that shell to be where it was, Thorson would have to be shot with his back to the edge of the platform and the slug would have knocked him off the edge. Therefore he was all the way

around on the other side where he had no reason to go if he was headed for his car. Our minds were on the same track until Julia Thorson said what she did and you got your back up."

"Our minds will never be on the same track."

"Don't let him get to you," the captain had said.

He picked up the phone and punched out three numbers. He had to be calling the M.E.'s office to see if they had a reading on the brown stain. He wouldn't admit it, but he hadn't given up on that yet.

I made a call of my own. Ten minutes later a bright young voice told me that Thorson had reserved two seats on the seven o'clock flight to Houston.

McCreedy was still talking to the M.E.

The captain looked up as I entered his office.

"If you want a new partner, see me next week."

"I might do that. I wasn't around at the time, so I have no idea of what happened to McCreedy's wife. Care to fill me in?"

"She was shot and killed by a crazy during a bar holdup about two years ago."

"Where was McCreedy?"

"Working late."

"So she was alone."

"Not exactly. A neighbor was with her."

"Male or female?"

"Male."

"What did McCreedy have to say about that?"

"Nothing."

"But others did."

"People talk, but it was simple enough. She had driven over to visit a sick friend in the hospital. When she came out, her car wouldn't start. The neighbor happened to be there visiting a relative and gave her a lift home. They stopped in for a drink. That's the story. I know because I handled it myself."

"But some people never believed it, including McCreedy."

"The trouble was the guy had a reputation and she and McCreedy were having a little difficulty." He shrugged. "She could have been with a bishop and they'd have found something to say."

"And that's how the Iceman was born."

He said nothing.

"I guess I'll get back to work."

"I wouldn't dream of delaying you."

McCreedy was off the phone. One thing that no one had ever mentioned was that he was a proud man, and nothing eats at a proud man more than thinking that someone is sorry for him, particularly when he isn't quite sure they have no reason.

"Are you going to tell me or let me guess?" I asked.

"Coffee. Powdered coffee, to be exact, as in instant. There

was more embedded in his coat than was visible to the eye. The M.E.'s guess is that he knocked an open jar off a table when he was shot and landed in it. They're doing an analysis to identify the brand."

"Thorson booked two seats on the seven o'clock to Houston but the Eliot woman told me his niece wasn't going with him. Who was?"

McCreedy tapped a pencil on the desk thoughtfully.

"Going to push this mugger theory to the limit because of what Julia Thorson said, McCreedy, or are you going to face facts?"

The pencil continued its slow tapping.

"She was right, you know," I said. "When you love someone, it makes no difference how things look to other people. Deep inside, you know if they are right or wrong. The problem is facing up to it, no matter which way it is. I could never understand how someone who would never lie to anyone else can lie to himself."

The pencil point snapped. "Spare me the philosophy. Let's go."

We were waiting for the elevator when Simon came into the lobby and stopped short, as though he was surprised.

"What are you two doing back here? Find the mugger?"

"Just go about your business,

Simon," said McCreedy.

"Everything in this building is my business."

The elevator doors opened.

"If you're going up to T&J, I'm coming along. Those people are my friends."

"Think again, Simon." I gently pushed him away from the door.

Jarret came out of his office when he heard us enter.

"Miss Eliot still here?" I asked.

"As a matter of fact, she is. She's in the showroom."

She was sitting on the sofa, her head back, her eyes closed.

I took one look, brushed by McCreedy, and felt for a pulse.

"Still alive. We'll need an ambulance fast, McCreedy."

Jarret was dead white. "She told me she was coming in here to rest."

"She intended to make it permanent, and she still might."

I picked up the glass on the floor at her feet and sniffed.

McCreedy returned. "Be here in five minutes. What did she take?"

"Barbiturates and alcohol. Let's get her up and walking."

"You stay, Jarret," he said. "While we're waiting, you can consider if you want to tell us what happened here today or have your rights read, get taken in, and let your attorney worry about it."

The paramedics were there in four minutes.

Jarret watched them wheel her out of the door, his face still white.

"What did you mean about reading me my rights, lieutenant? I've done nothing wrong."

"Stop tap dancing, Jarret. The woman tried to commit suicide. Do you expect us to believe it had nothing to do with Thorson's death?"

"It had everything to do with Thorson's death. She was in love with him and expected him to marry her. As a matter of fact, she was expecting him to take her to Houston with him. This morning he told her he was taking another woman. They had a helluva row in here. I came in just in time to see her slap him. She isn't a frail woman and she was very angry. Big as he was, she knocked him into the bar and everything went flying."

"Including a jar of instant coffee," I said.

"She had been making a cup for him when the argument started. We had to get Simon to clean up. Lars left an hour later. The next thing we knew, Simon was telling us he was dead. Imagine how she felt. First the argument and then the murder. No wonder she tried to kill herself."

"He was alive when he left here?"

"I said he was." Jarret stiff-

ened. "Oh, now I see what you had been thinking. You thought she killed him."

"And you helped her move the body downstairs," I said.

"Good Lord," said Jarret weakly.

I glanced at McCreedy. "Did Simon leave before or after Thorson?"

"Shortly before, if I remember correctly."

We both slammed out of the door. We didn't bother with the elevator. That was too slow. We went down the stairs three at a time, burst into the first floor corridor and through the door that led to the receiving platform just as Simon emerged from the basement, a small bag in his hand.

He slung the bag at us and with the same motion pulled a small automatic. I yelled and threw myself to one side, clawing at my holster, but McCreedy simply stood there and raised his hands.

"Don't do anything stupid, Simon."

Mr. Calm. Mr. Cool. The Ice-man. Even though he was no longer dealing with an affable, talkative super but a wild-eyed man whose world had come apart and who intended to let no one stand in his way as he ran.

"I think McCreedy is trying to get himself killed. The psy-

chiatrist doesn't agree, but McCreedy is too smart to let him get a handle on it so I can't pull him off duty, but I can make sure he has someone with him I can trust. Like you, Stoneman."

My .38 was out and leveled and I was screaming, "Get out of there, McCreedy!" He never moved. I fired, my shot only a heartbeat before Simon's, so close they sounded like one but just far enough apart so that Simon's ricocheted somewhere off the ceiling as he fell.

I stalked forward and kicked the gun away. We were both lucky. I'd caught him in the shoulder.

I walked up to McCreedy and hit him as hard as I could.

"Never again make me shoot a man because you're too stupid to want to live," I said.

I left him lying there holding his jaw and looking up at me. He could take care of Simon and the damned paperwork. I needed a drink.

Julia Thorson sat on the sofa. I stood at the floor-to-ceiling windows, looking at the night view of the river.

"Did you know your uncle carried a gun?"

Her reflection shook its head. "No."

"Neither did Jarret or Miss

Eliot. The gun was why he never worried about using the back entrance. When he left the elevator, Simon was waiting. He liked Miss Eliot and he didn't like the way your uncle was treating her and he told him so. Your uncle wasn't going to stand for a lecture from a building custodian. They argued. Your uncle drew the gun. In the struggle, he was shot. Simon dragged the body to the basement, hid the gun, waited a few minutes, and then pretended he'd found the body. Since he had no reason to kill him; and Miss Eliot did, we settled on her. When he saw us come back, he knew something was up so he decided it was time to get out. It all would have been easier if Jarret and Miss Eliot had told us what had happened this morning, but they had no idea it had anything to do with his death."

"They told me nothing also, not even of his relationship with Miss Eliot. I knew he was not a gentle man but he was never a foolish one. He would not have fought over some money. That was why I did not believe he had been killed for the reason it appeared. I loved him because he was my father's brother and always kind to me. I would have found it difficult to tell him I was leaving the firm and opening my own shop

in Paris. I will now find it difficult to tell Mr. Jarret."

I smiled. "He won't be the only one you'll make unhappy. McCreedy—"

She joined me at the window, her perfume faint, her voice low. "I do not understand. When we met, I thought— But he became angry with me, I do not know why."

"You said that when something happens to someone one loves, one knows when it is not what it seems. There was some gossip when McCreedy's wife was killed, and he's been carrying that doubt ever since instead of facing up to it one way or the other and putting it behind him."

"I did not know. I am sorry he sent you to tell me about Simon instead of coming himself. Now I cannot apologize."

Everyone makes decisions every day; small, large, insignificant, major—but seldom two important ones within hours.

"He promised to help you with the arrangements for your uncle. I'd hold him to it." I glanced at my watch. "Right now he's having dinner at his favorite restaurant, alone, of course." I grinned. "Probably eating something soft. I can run you over there but I can't guarantee your reception. McCreedy is a strange man. And with you returning to Paris

shortly, it may not be worth it."

She smiled. "Perhaps, but then neither of us would have to live our lives wondering if it might have been."

I watched from the bar as she approached McCreedy's table. McCreedy rose. They talked. McCreedy came around and held a chair for her. He was smiling, the softness in his face again.

I waved away the bartender and headed for the door. The First Ice Age in the life of Ger-

ald McCreedy was over. I hoped I didn't have to put up with another.

"I pride myself on knowing my men, Stoneman. You're even more hardheaded than he is. The death of his wife made him the Iceman. You were born that way."

Yeah, sure, captain. I turned to look at Julia Thorson. Damn McCreedy, anyway.

The captain would never know how close I came to letting Simon fire first.

(continued from page 2)

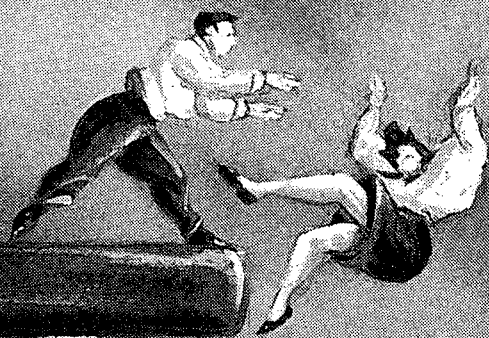
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FICTION

Typecasting



by
Bruce Scates

“I’d like to speak to your wife in connection with a murder investigation, Mr. Cobb.”

Leo Cobb stared: the man on his doorstep looked almost too much like an “as advertised on TV” detective to be a homicide detective. Plain dark gray overcoat. Dark gray fedora. Even the voice was Early Dragnet deadpan. What was more unusual: despite a careful—police regulation?—blankness on the puffy, faintly sly face, a sense of anticipation, of *enjoyment*, leaked out from the man’s small, cynical gray eyes. There was something vaguely familiar about him: had Cobb seen him somewhere before?

Leo Cobb might have been suspicious if he hadn’t been scared. “Hallie? You want to talk to *Hallie* about a murder?”

And—scared—Leo Cobb stepped numbly back from the door. Because of . . . Hallie.

Hallie Cobb was the weakness of Leo Cobb that Ross had counted on. Cobb was fifty years old, squarely built, gray-crewcutted; his face was blunt, leathery-skinned, with a David Niven mustache that was supposed to add a touch of class. On that grit-and-spit face, it looked like an ascot on a pit bull. Cobb wasn’t class: he was an intimidating presence, throbbing with energy, ruthlessness, and quick and violent temper.

Hallie. Because of the magic word, however, what Leo Cobb looked now was scared. *Hallie*.

In Leo Cobb’s living room, Ross saw that the chairs and sofa weren’t meant to be sat on. They were there as uncomfortable but expensive proof that Leo Cobb had come a long way since the West Virginia coal fields. Coming to the Washington, D.C., suburbs, Leo had worked his way up from carpenter to owning his own construction company. Starting by building houses in the suburbs for people with white collars, college diplomas, and attaché cases, he now lived in one of the most exclusive of those suburbs. With a young Mercedes, a young mustache, and a young wife. *Hallie*.

“Would you ask Mrs. Cobb to come in here, Mr. Cobb?” Ross sat on a chair, placed his fedora beside him on the rug, took out a notebook and pencil. He waited: like an actor for a cue.

“She doesn’t,” said Cobb, “know anything about no . . . a murder.” Cobb scowled at Ross, his face simmering from the scared look to belligerency. “She couldn’t. Hallie never leaves the house. She . . . Hallie likes to keep to herself.”

Ross, waiting, thought: *You like to keep her to yourself, Leo. You keep her a prisoner, Leo.*

"She . . . it scares her." Leo waved a thick hand at the windows and—what? The picture-perfect, green-lawned suburban Eden outside to which he had brought Hallie? Or, farther off, the big city of Washington? Or maybe just the entire United States or the whole world? "It's . . . well, hell, it's not like back home in West Virginia."

Ross said: "I just want to ask her a few questions, Mr. Cobb."

Cobb let his breath out. "You see . . ." Again he hesitated. Leo Cobb, the self-made man, wasn't used to explaining anything to anybody. "She gets . . . *confused*. She's not . . . *goddam!*"

As Ross watched, Leo Cobb scrubbed a rough hand over his face. Abruptly, however, the hand stopped, the volatile black eyes narrowed, and Cobb at last asked the question for which Ross had been waiting.

"Who is it who's been killed?"

"Eric Seton, Mr. Cobb. Maybe you knew him? You were in the same country club."

"Christ, that playboy!" Cobb's mouth looked sour. "Guys like Seton don't like to admit I'm on the same planet, let alone the same country club. That includes allowing me the privilege of hitting a little white ball with a stick with them. I might be a bad influence on the balls. Seton and his crowd wouldn't have anything to do with my wife, neither. He's—they're too damn good for her, too."

Ross's sardonic eyes shone: Cobb was taking the news of Seton's death well. "How about letting her tell me that, Mr. Cobb?"

Ross, motionless, sat in his chair: there was something about him: he reminded Leo Cobb of a cynical, malicious puppet, waiting for the cue that would jerk it into life. Dangerous, destructive life.

Leo Cobb licked his lips. "All right, I'll get her."

Act Two, thought Ross. Enter from Stage Right *Beauty*, now better known as Mrs. Beast. Closely followed by Mr. Beast. Upstairs, he heard Leo opening a door: dimly a country and western song, thinly, childishly sung, whined toward Ross's ears. It sounded as if Mrs. Beast's beauty wasn't vocal-cord deep.

The singing stopped. Five minutes later Ross heard Leo Cobb's voice on the stairs, soothing, "You'll be all right, hon." Then: *Enter Beauty*—and Ross saw what all Leo Cobb's and Eric Seton's glandular activity was about.

"This is Mrs. Cobb, lieutenant."

Who walks in beauty like the night—and better yet, wrapped in a pale blue terrycloth robe, her buttercup hair freshly brushed and shiny. Like a little girl after a bath—a little girl with big improvements.

"I'm H-Hallie Cobb," she stammered gently, smiling shyly. Heart-stoppingly.

This is the kind of girl, thought Ross, that makes grown men want to bark like a seal, gnaw chair legs, or simply go out and hang themselves in the garage. A tall, beautiful, bewildered girl, age nineteen, with the face of a child. Blonde down to her bones. Innocent to her coccyx. Her eyes as true blue and every bit as intelligent-looking as cornflowers, and yet as full of serenity, mysteries, and the answers to all important questions as a Bali Ha'i technicolor sunset. So long of leg, so deep of bosom, so overdressed in anything more enveloping than a bikini or maybe Sheena's leopard skin. And so dumb. A fresh-scrubbed, radiantly glowing stupidity. A girl for whom getting toothpaste out of a tube is a major engineering challenge. Everything between perfect ear and perfect ear a perfect blank.

Hallie Cobb, Ross saw, was a human Bambi. Men wanted to protect her at first sight. They also wanted to croon Johnny Mathis ballads while taking her to a desert island to save her from toothpaste tubes, aluminum-siding salesmen, and degenerates who wanted to croon Johnny Mathis ballads. In other words, to Ross, the kind of girl who is not only stupid herself but is the cause of stupidity in others. Like: Leo Cobb. Like: Eric Seton. But not like: Ross. To him, Hallie Cobb was a great improvement over everything except money. A lot of money.

Ross heard her saying, her face puzzled: "Haven't I seen you somewhere? Maybe on the TV?"

Ross smiled blandly and shook his head. Ronald Reagan probably reminded her of an actor she'd seen on the *Late Show*. "The guys at headquarters say I look a little like a third-rate cop character named Lieutenant Jolly. On some series a couple of years ago."

"Oh." Disappointed. Her voice was hushed warm honey, with a few pinches of the West Virginia "holler" where Leo found her—under a cabbage, probably.

Hallie Cobb and Leo Cobb waited expectantly, on the sofa, her hand in his. Following Ross's every expression, movement, word. Riveted. As if he were an actor in a television program they were viewing. A cop show. As if he were—what was his name? Lieutenant Louis Jolly. Ross delivered his next question just like Lou Jolly would: "Mrs. Cobb, could you tell me what you know about Eric Seton?"

"Eric S-Seton?" The soft stammer was another twist of the heartstrings around her finger. Ross wanted to hold her tongue

firmly and help her across words. Poor B-B-B-Bambi. "Look, I *told* you," said Leo Cobb, "she don't—didn't—know Seton."

She just gazed at Ross. Eyes blank, rosebud mouth slightly parted. It was obvious: the luscious moron hadn't a clue.

Ross wasn't about to blow this job because of someone's high cuteness quotient. He had his professional reputation to consider. Getting up, he approached Hallie where she perched, as if ready for flight, on the edge of the sofa. "This is Eric Seton, Mrs. Cobb." Ross held before her a photograph.

"Dammit, can't you—" began Leo.

Hallie Cobb interrupted: "I reckon I *h-have* seen that m-man!"

The stunned—the scared—expression smacked Leo Cobb's face again.

"Where, Mrs. Cobb?"

"At . . . that c-club place, I think."

"Goddamit—the *country club*, you mean!" barked Leo.

"That time I went with Mrs. . . ." She frowned. "Mrs. . . . Spam."

"*Spahn*," said Leo.

"You said she could take me to that f-flower show they had. Oh, they was p-pretty flowers, too!" Hallie's face lit up.

"And that was when you encountered the individual in question?"

She looked blankly at Leo, who translated: "He means Seton."

Hallie Cobb said: "Yes."

"What happened when you met Eric Seton, Mrs. Cobb?"

Frown. "He shook my hand."

"That's all?"

"He shook it twice."

Ross thought: A man ought to have to buy a ticket to see an act like this.

While Leo Cobb thought: The bastard's enjoying this. Even when his face is deadpan, his eyes look like he's sneering at a couple of monkeys.

"Is that all that happened between you and Eric Seton, Mrs. Cobb? Shaking hands?" Ross examined his notes. "Twice."

"He wanted me to g-go and get a drink of something with him. I tried to tell him I w-weren't thirsty." The childish face on the unchildish body looked as emptily beautiful and smoothly innocent as a Barbie doll's. "Mrs. Spam, though, seemed to be r-real thirsty."

Leo exploded: "Did that goddam playboy keep on pestering you?"

Hallie winced. Leo's roar or remembering Seton? "That m-man called me on the phone a l-lot."

"That son of a bitch!"

"Oh, Leo honey!" soothed Hallie. "I didn't pay him no m-mind! That Seton, he's not a nice m-man at all. Not like you, Leo. Not a fine sweet man at all. I didn't like him one b-bit, no I didn't!"

Ross watched. Listened. And thought: Maybe Leo Cobb can, with Hallie Cobb, be something he thinks he can't afford to be outside the little desert island of this house, living with Beauty. Just like Papa Bear can blow on his porridge in his cottage, and eat Bambi outside it. Leo probably keeps a suit of sheep's clothing in the hall closet; something comfortable and flattering for the wolf—or Papa Bear—to slip into so as to impress the little woman around the house. And pretend to be innocent again. And *feel* innocent again?

"Most women considered Eric Seton a handsome man, Mrs. Cobb. And of course he was rich," said Ross. He found it hard to keep the cynicism out of his voice. "Those two things seemed enough to attract quite a few women. They didn't require he pass the Boy Scout oath."

"He isn't *nice*!" Hallie repeated. The cornflower eyes widened while she shook her blonde head with childish decisiveness. "He scared me! There's m-meanness in him. That S-Seton—if he don't get what he wants, he's the kind that likes to h-hurt people." Hallie hugged her arms to her breasts and looked at Leo. "Oh, Leo honey, he s-scared me!"

Ross saw the look on Hallie's face, and the look on Leo's. On the blunt, hard, battered face of the fifty-year-old man. On the beautiful, fragile, open face of the girl-woman from a West Virginia holler. Ross understood their roles now: Leo's was to protect her; hers was to give Leo something in his life that was worth protecting. Call it her innocence; call it the illusion for Leo of innocence in himself. Or call it a sheep's suit hanging in the hall closet.

Ross, with his own role to play, decided it was time to start twisting the screw tighter. "You're saying you never *physically* met Seton besides that one time at the country club, Mrs. Cobb?"

She shook her head, her face luminously honest.

"Could you tell me where you spent last night, Mrs. Cobb? Between eight o'clock and eleven o'clock?"

"I was r-right here."

"Can you confirm that she was here, Mr. Cobb?"

Leo hesitated. "Well, hell, not exactly. I had to go to Baltimore on business. I didn't get back till almost two. But Hallie, she never leaves—"

Ross's mouth tightening, he cut Leo short: "You're underestimating your wife's traveling abilities, Mr. Cobb." *My God—he was talking like Lieutenant Jolly.* "Last night, between seven twenty-five and eight fifty, your wife managed to get to an expensive restaurant in Georgetown, and then from nine thirty to ten forty she was at an expensive house off Foxhall Drive."

"But . . . I weren't!"

Ross felt the tension building nicely now. Watching Leo Cobb's face, he said: "The expensive house belongs—*belonged*—to Eric Seton."

Leo Cobb turned his head slowly in the direction of Hallie.

Hallie protested: "I weren't no such p-place!" She looked and sounded quite convincing.

Leo and Hallie stared at Ross. Waiting for what he would say next. Ross felt his adrenaline surge. Being a homicide detective was like stepping on a stage, the center of spotlights and eyes. Only now there were just two pairs of eyes. And he mustn't sound like Lieutenant Jolly.

"Mrs. Cobb, the waiter and the maitre d' at the restaurant have given exact descriptions of you. So has Seton's chauffeur. They also heard Seton use your correct name. And they say last night wasn't the first time you were in the company of Eric Seton." Ross couldn't resist: "Apparently your husband has frequent business engagements till late at night."

Leo Cobb looked like a man whose back was broken.

"That's a mean l-lie!" cried Hallie Cobb. She looked from Leo to Ross, unable to comprehend, her eyes filling with tears.

Ross inspected his notebook. "I wonder if I could see the purse you took with you last night, Mrs. Cobb?"

"But I t-told you—"

"A light blue purse," Ross continued relentlessly. "According to the maitre d' and the chauffeur, it's covered with a silver metal mesh and has a silver clasp."

Leo Cobb spoke disbelievingly: "I gave you that purse on our anniversary."

"Would you let me see it, Mrs. Cobb?"

"But—"

"Go and get it, Hallie!"

The rosebud mouth quivered. But the bewildered big beautiful girl with the yellow hair and the terrycloth robe went. When she returned, three or four minutes later, she returned with something missing from her face and her walk. She had, though, a light-blue purse with a silver metal mesh and a silver clasp.

"Do you mind if I look inside, Mrs. Cobb?"

Dully she handed Ross the blue purse. Ross's hand plunged into the purse.

"*Could you tell me where you got this, Mrs. Cobb?*"

Ross's hand reappeared: from it dangled, glittering in the light of the room's lamps, a diamond necklace.

Hallie Cobb gasped; Leo Cobb's eyes bulged in his raw, violent face.

"Well, Mrs. Cobb?"

Her head moved dazedly from side to side; she stared at the necklace—it might have been a unicorn, a king cobra, or a hand grenade. Or even a diamond necklace.

"Have you ever seen it before, Mr. Cobb?"

Leo Cobb stared at the necklace, stared at Hallie Cobb. "No."

"This necklace was a gift from Eric Seton, Mr. Cobb." Ross slipped the necklace, Leo's and Hallie's eyes following the movement, inside his overcoat. "At least that's what Seton's housekeeper and his chauffeur insist." Ross paused before adding casually: "Apparently Seton liked to give little presents to his mistresses."

It was as if Ross was no longer there. Not to the man and woman on the sofa. "*Oh, Leo honey, there's not a b-bit of truth in what he's s-saying!*"

"You didn't know about your wife's relationship with Eric Seton, Mr. Cobb?"

Leo Cobb seemed not to have heard Ross's question. But Ross knew he had.

"Your wife is a highly attractive young woman. It's not surprising that some man besides yourself might try to do something about it, is it? And Eric Seton—Seton had a persuasive way with the ladies."

"You're just telling *l-lies!* Mean *l-lies!*"

A vein pulsed on Leo Cobb's forehead. He said hoarsely: "What has all this—my wife and . . . last night—got to do with Seton's murder?" The words seemed forced out of Cobb. "Are you saying you think Hallie *killed* Seton?"

Ross's face registered, in turn, surprise, pain, reproach. Expertly.

In a subdued voice, he said: "Mr. Cobb, I don't think I've said or implied that, have I? At least, I sincerely hope I haven't."

Cobb smashed his fist down on his thigh, making Hallie flinch. "Goddamit—why did you come here!"

Ross, smiling, said smoothly: "*Information*, Mr. Cobb. That's all. We're checking up on Seton's whereabouts and his . . . his activities last night. Your wife was apparently the last person to see Seton alive."

"But . . . you don't think she killed him?"

Two tormented faces waited for Ross's answer. Let them wait. Ross juggled the other shoe—before he let it drop. "We already know who killed Eric Seton. It was the husband of a woman Seton was having an affair with. You see, your wife wasn't the only one, Mr. Cobb."

Cobb listened silently.

"We figure the man came to Seton's house right after your wife left Seton in a taxi. Seton was still in bed when the husband shot him."

Ross's voice went on, casually insinuating, insistent: "He was the old fashioned type. The old fashioned type doesn't take a modern attitude about their wives slipping between the sheets with another man. With some younger man, Mr. Cobb. This jealous husband—he was about your age, and the wife was about Mrs. Cobb's age. Eric Seton liked them young."

Leo Cobb's face spasmed with rage. Ross had been waiting to see that look.

But Hallie startled him. "*Why?*" she suddenly whimpered. She gazed at Ross; tears spilled from her eyes. "Why are you telling these l-lies about m-me?" Oddly, thought Ross, her face wasn't angry (was Beauty capable of anger? or hate? or fighting back?)—only bewildered, helpless, beseeching. Wanting some answer. "Why? *Why?*"

Leo Cobb's voice exploded as loudly and violently as a shotgun blast: "*You tramp!*"

She trembled, her body huddling. "Oh hon, it's not *true!*"

"You're *lying!* He says so. He's a *cop*. Why would he lie about something like that. He don't have no reason to. Why should he? *Why?*"

Leo Cobb's voice seemed to shrivel Hallie Cobb. "I don't know. I don't know w-why he's telling t-them lies."

Leo Cobb rose to his feet with a weary, beaten look. His face

reminded Ross of the faces of coal miners emerging from a shift—Leo might never have escaped the hardness, violence, and fatalism of those West Virginia coal fields after all. "I guess I always knew you was too young and pretty for me. That some younger, goodlooking man would steal you away from me."

"Leo, hon, it's you—"

"*Seton!* That's who you wanted. That goddam playboy who could have any woman he wanted. And he had *you!*"

Leo hit Hallie. The blunt, scarred hand swung at the cheating world and landed on Hallie Cobb. Her head jerked to one side; she crumpled on the sofa. Lying there, her hand flew to her cheek. Hallie's eyes looked terrified. It wasn't, Ross thought, physical fear alone. It was as if something as necessary and irreplaceable to her as warmth and safety were being snatched away. And she knew there was nothing she could do to prevent it.

"*Tramp.*"

Leo Cobb turned his back on her and almost stumbled from the room.

Hallie Cobb watched him go; her face sagged, her eyes dulled; the defeat and resignation of the hollers seemed to sweep over and crush the bewildered, child-like features.

Ross watched, waited, tried to concentrate. Her face was distracting. His forehead felt hot and wet, his shirt seemed glued between his shoulder blades. He wondered what Lieutenant Lou Jolly would do.

Leo Cobb abruptly reappeared in the doorway. His shoulders slumped like an old man's and his arms hung as if exhausted at his sides. He stared at Hallie. But no longer as if he could see her. Without any sign of expression at all on his face.

It occurred to Ross that neither of the two people that were here when he entered the house existed now.

"You get now, policeman."

Wearily Leo Cobb's right hand lifted from his side. Light glinted off a black pistol barrel.

Ross turned immediately and walked to the door.

Just before he went out, he looked back; Hallie Cobb's face no longer even asked *Why?*

The car was parked one house down the street from the Cobbs' house. When Ross climbed into the passenger seat, he was surprised to see the driver's forehead covered with sweat. Ross had supposed

the man incapable of sweating; it was only the second human thing he had discovered about his employer. The first was what had made the man hire Ross in the first place.

The driver didn't bother to glance at Ross. The arrogantly handsome face with the deep-set, chilly blue eyes continued to look up at the Cobbs' house. He asked: "How did it go?"

"DeNiro couldn't have given a better performance. Except . . ."

"Except?"

"I reminded her of a TV cop."

When there was no reply, Ross continued: "Erik Estrada."

"Oh?"

"Actually, it was a third-rate cop character on a third-rate cop show. Funny, a girl who probably can't remember her own birthday remembers that. It was the kind of character nobody bothers to read the credits for except your mother and your ex-wife. 'Lieutenant Lou Jolly was played by Terry Ross.'"

"You have a limited repertoire, Ross, don't you? Third-rate cops and third-rate gangsters."

"Typecasting. It's the story of my career. They're the only parts I ever get offered. If it wasn't for typecasting, I wouldn't have to moonlight on these little outside acting jobs."

"Your fee, Ross, is in an envelope in the glove compartment." The voice was as cool and haughty as its owner's face.

"Better get going," Ross said, reaching for the envelope.

But the driver seemed to be waiting.

Terry Ross was still counting the money—more than he had ever made in his minor parts on the stage, the occasional television show or low-budget movie playing gangsters or cops (he was particularly convincing as a cop)—when they heard the first shot.

And then, moments later, the second, final shot.

"That's what you were waiting for?" asked Ross.

Silence.

"She turned you down, didn't she?"

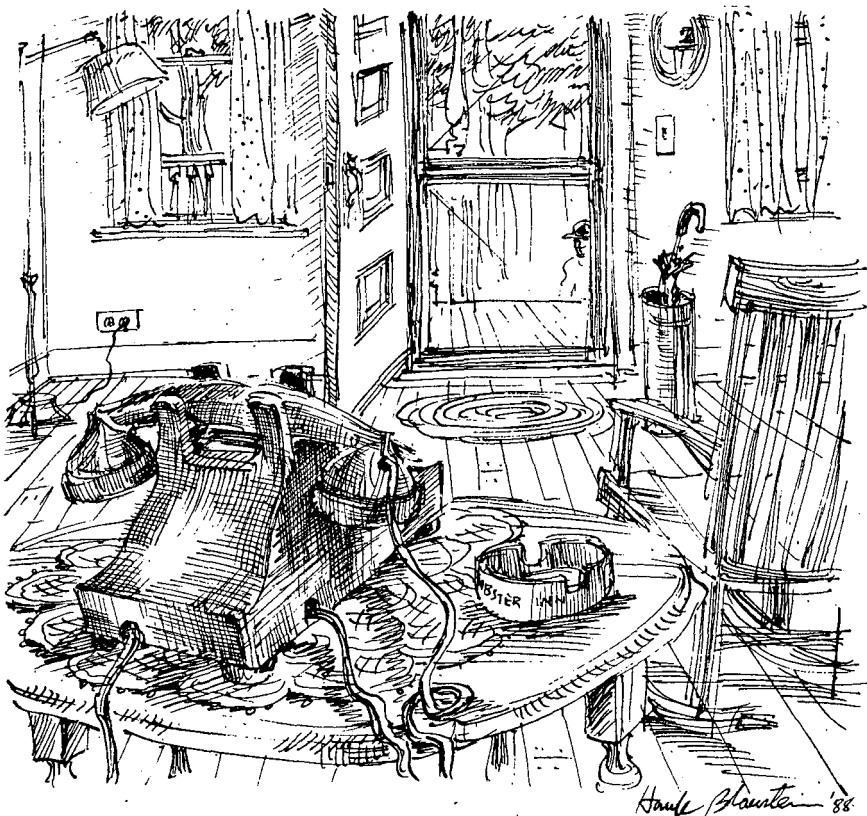
Eric Seton didn't reply. Bleakly he stared up at the house for a moment longer.

He started the car engine and pulled away into the darkness.

FICTION

Changes

by Augusta Hancock



The red lights on the dashboard glowed suddenly as the engine stalled. The man driving the BMW convertible coasted it over to the side of the road, frowned, and swore.

He tried to restart the car. The starter ground. He looked around. There was no traffic. To his right was the old house set back in a field with dense trees at the edges. On the left side of

the road there was nothing but woods. He turned the key again uselessly, then got out of the car and walked up to the house. Odd that the car would die here. It was not the place he wanted to be right now.

As he walked up to the house, he heard a power saw nearby. The front door of the house was open; a screen door hazed the view inside. He knocked on the frame of the screen. Silence. He knocked on the clapboard wall beside the door. There was no sound. Inside, he could see the telephone on a table across the little hall. He tried the screen door; it was unlatched.

"Hello?" he called inside.

No answer.

He opened the door, stepped in, and walked to the phone. As he picked up the receiver and put a finger to the dial, he heard a sound behind him and felt hard metal pressed to the back of his skull.

In Wimbleton Jones's summer cottage the phone rang.

"Hi, Tom. What's on your docket this morning?" Wimbie asked his friend, police chief Tom Lawson.

"I've got to go meet the sheriff about that drug bust. He wants to take over the case, and I suppose he should. The state people and the Feds want to get in on it, too. I'm trusted with less and

less these days. It seems like I can't even tie my shoelaces without asking somebody else first. Anyway, I thought you might just want to appear over there."

"I'd like to, but that guy Milt Swift called and said he wanted to come here to the house to talk to me."

"He's the one who bought Mill Island."

"Yeah. I know a little about him from the city. He's been on the edge of some funny deals, nothing really bad. He just likes to bend things his way as much as he can get away with. I'm curious to know why he wants to talk to me. He's already forty minutes late, but I'd better wait here a little longer."

"See you later, then. I'll let you know what happens."

"Thanks. Have fun." Wimbie hung up.

Wimbie kind of envied Swift his island. When he was twenty, he had dreamed of having an island off the coast of Maine. He couldn't afford one, and as he got older, he thought about the problems of water and having to keep a boat in shape and going back and forth in all kinds of weather. He'd settled for a nice piece of coastal land, which he and Sarah got to for less than a month every summer. Although it was supposed to be a vacation place, he seemed

to work with Tom Lawson on at least one job every year. Even before he'd become a detective, Wimbie'd felt the appeal of a kind of mystery about Maine. He liked mysteries. Behind the white houses, the dark spruces, the big sky, the blue water, there was something sinister. It was partly the sea, of course, partly the fog. Maine was old and stark and northern.

Milt Swift, he thought, wouldn't buy an island just for the sake of wanting an island, just because he liked mysteries. He must have something more solid in mind.

Wimbie looked at his watch, then found the phone number for the yacht club, where Swift kept his car. Wimbie had seen it there. Nice-looking job, just right for up here, pretty but not pretentious. Maybe Swift couldn't start it.

"Cliff? Wimbie Jones. Do you happen to know if Milt Swift came in from his island this morning?"

"Ayup," replied Cliff Sanderling. "Most an hour ago. He come in and took off in his car."

"Thanks a lot."

That was certainly plenty of time to have done several errands on the way. Maybe he'd had trouble.

Wimbie called to his wife. "Sarah? I'll be back before long. If that guy shows up, keep him

here. I'm going to have a look around. I'll call you if anything happens."

Driving along the road to the yacht club, watching for Swift's car, he passed Will Elton's house. Nice old man, Will. His family had been some of the first settlers here. After a stretch of woods came Charlie Haskill's garage and filling station. On the other side of the road, a kid was hitchhiking toward town. Wimbie passed the house where the woman who used to do laundry for them had lived, a pretty old Cape Cod with a beautiful view of the water. She'd retired, sold the house to summer people, and gone to live in a new little apartment complex for old people. That kind of place was a new idea around here.

He came to three scattered houses of people he didn't know. One of them had a sign saying "Mussels." The first years Wimbie had come here, the coves were dark blue with mussels, but no one ate them. Men dug at the clams underneath but ignored the mussels. Wimbie gathered mussels and cooked them in seasoned steam. He loved them that way. Everyone thought he was nuts. But then one day Tom asked how you cooked mussels, and now you could buy smoked mussels in the local grocery.

Change. Every year there

was change. New restaurants, new shops, new houses. Buildings and real estate prices—and taxes—went up. The people changed, too. In the old days, people like Milt Swift didn't come here. Wimbie supposed that he himself wasn't the traditional type either, but he was less flashy than Milt Swift. The Kingsleys were a good example of old-time summer people, conservative, quiet, sturdy.

The road went around the end of the cove where boat masts rocked at their moorings. Wimbie negotiated the sharp bend and pulled up to the shack and dock that were called the yacht club; it was simply a good cove for mooring, with a caretaker who kept an eye on things. Cliff Sanderling lived down the road and spent his days puttering around the dock and the shack.

Fog was hovering out at the edge of the bay. A gull on the dock stared at Wimbie with its sideways eye, waited until he was almost there, then flapped awkwardly away. Wimbie got out of the car and approached Cliff, a gaunt man of indeterminate age.

"Ayup. His boat's right out there. He started out toward town or toward your place. Didn't say which."

Wimbie went back the way he'd come, wondering about Milt

Swift, where he was, what he was up to. He slowed at the first house. It was obvious that no one was there; the grass had grown up, the shades were drawn. The next house belonged to the mussel people. They looked at him blankly, but the teenage son responded to the description of the car. He'd noticed it on the road, but not this morning. Wimbie bought a bag of mussels. At the third house, no one knew anything.

He stopped at the garage.

"Ayup. I saw him go by a while back. Must have been an hour ago. I was working on Sammy's car. That must of took about half an hour. I'd just got going on it, and I've been out of it and on this one about that long. Ayup, about an hour."

Wimbie drove on to Will Elton's house, a turn-of-the-century white clapboard farmhouse, fairly recently painted, placed on a rise back from the road staring blankly at passersby. Between it and the road was a cleared field. At either side of the field, woods ran down to the road. The woods at the back must go down to the shore, he decided. Wimbie didn't know Will very well, but he'd seen the old man sitting on his porch, looking out toward the road.

No one responded to Wimbie's knock or shout. He noticed

some tire tracks in the dirt and thought that perhaps someone had come to take Will for a ride. The old man didn't have a car.

Wimbie drove on and stopped at Sonny Little's vegetable stand. When Wimbie had first come here, no one grew vegetables or had a stand, and there were hardly any animals around. Now there were horses and cows and goats and sheep. Sonny Little came up. He had a small beard and a large hat. He hadn't seen the car go by, but he hadn't been at the stand much. He just left a bowl for the money, so the stand didn't need tending. That was one thing that hadn't changed, Wimbie thought. People still pretty much trusted each other. The peas looked good, so Wimbie picked up a bag and helped himself, weighed his purchase, figured out from the sign how much he owed, and put his money in the bowl. He also took and paid for a box of raspberries and a head of lettuce. They looked deliciously fresh and dewy. They'd be nice for lunch with the mussels and the bread Sarah had baked yesterday.

A little way down the road, he picked up the hitchhiking kid. The boy had started out earlier that morning but had forgotten his wallet, so he'd gone back home for it. The first time he'd started out, there was

a white BMW convertible parked at the side of the road in front of Will Elton's house. It hadn't been there the second time. Wimbie gave the kid a quick lift to town. No one Wimbie spoke to in town had seen the car, and it wasn't parked on the main street.

Wimbie went back to Will Elton's house.

He knocked and called out again, then went inside. A phone stood on a table in the front hall near what must be a closet. He glanced into the living room. It was neat and almost bare except for a comfortable-looking chair and a television set. On the front windowsill lay an unfamiliar-looking instrument, perhaps a remote control for the television. In the kitchen, half a bowl of cereal and a plate with remains of a fried egg were on the table.

He went upstairs. There were two bedrooms, both with beds made. On one bed was a suitcase with men's clothes in it. Under them, a gun. In a pocket, a packet of fifty-dollar bills, quite a lot of them. Wimbie thought he heard a sound downstairs and went back down. Still nobody around.

He walked out to the barn, which still had lots of old tools and ropes and barrels left over from farming days. To the side of the door stood a new black

Mercedes with current New Jersey license plates. Wimbie looked in the glove compartment. Nothing but some maps. The trunk was locked.

He frowned and went back to the house. A power saw was buzzing not far away. Tom wouldn't be in the office, but Wimbie could leave word or maybe get Tom on the car radio. Inside the house, Wimbie picked up the phone; then he heard the closet door opening behind him. He felt the gun hard at the back of his head.

“This is Sarah Jones, Tom. I'm sorry to bother you. I wonder if you've been in touch with Wimbie in the last few hours.”

“No. I talked to him on the phone this morning. Matter of fact, I saw his car in front of Will Elton's a little later and wondered what he was doing there because he said he was meeting Milt Swift.”

“Milt Swift was supposed to come here, but he never showed up. Wimbie went out to look for him and said he'd be back right away or he'd call. Maybe he found Swift, but three hours seems a long meeting, and Wimbie doesn't like to miss lunch, as you know. Sometimes we say, 'See you when I see you.' But this time I have

a funny feeling about it.”

“I guess I do, too,” said Tom. “I'll get on it right away.”

Tom dialed Will Elton's number and let it ring a long time; no one answered.

“Come on along, Jeb,” he said to his deputy. “I've got an idea this might take the two of us. Let's go over to Will Elton's.”

Wimbie's car was not there. The door of the house was open.

“Will?” Tom called out through the screen. He banged on the door frame. Will was deaf. Tom went inside, glanced into the living room, then went through the dining room to the kitchen. Dirty dishes on the table, breakfast half-eaten. He went upstairs, still calling to Will. Everything looked neat and tidy and normal. The beds were made, but the towels were hung sloppily. He and Jeb went out to the barn. The usual old stuff there. No sign of Wimbie tied up in a corner. But it sure looked as if somebody'd had a car over there in the corner not long ago.

“I was thinking,” said Jeb. “There's an old road goes down behind the house to the shore. It used to be a town road, before roads was paved, but Will's father-in-law took it over and called it 'Dolby's Private Way.' It's still on some road maps.”

Tom nodded. “We didn't look in the cellar,” he said, noticing

the outside entrance. "I wonder if we can get in this way."

The door slanting over the steps was padlocked.

Back in the kitchen, they found a door to the cellar. This was locked, too, but they fiddled it open, turned on the light, and went down.

In the far corner, Will Elton was tied to a chair and gagged. They released him.

"Jeb, I guess you'd better call the sheriff and the doctor. Who tied you up, Will?"

"Never seen him before. He come to the door asking could he rent the house. I told him all kinds of people been trying to buy and rent my house lately, but I wasn't selling or renting. He seemed some angry. Next thing I knew, there was two more of them and they grabbed me and tied me up. I sat down here I don't know how long and then they brought somebody else down here. Seems like I'd seen him before, but I don't rightly know who he was. I guess I heard some more noise upstairs. It sounded like they was using my power saw, too. Then they come and took the other man away and left me down here. I'm right glad to see you, Tom. Nobody much comes around. It's nice to have some company."

"You've had quite a lot today, Will, but not the right kind. I

don't know that it's a good idea, you living here alone."

"Doc and the sheriff are coming," Jeb reported. He and Tom helped Will upstairs into a comfortable chair in the parlor.

"I guess I'll go have a look-see down that old road," Jeb said and went outside.

The doctor came quickly. Tom went through the house once more, checking closets, looking for anybody or anything that shouldn't be there. He even found the attic; it looked as if nobody'd been up there for years. He turned back at the first big spiderweb.

When Tom came into the living room, Will was talking about his daughter.

Tom said, "I don't see anybody waiting around to give trouble. The sheriff should be here any minute. I'm going to see if Jeb's found anything."

He pushed through the alders, hardhack, and wild roses to the old road. Once past the bushes, he noticed that the trees that had grown up over the road had been recently cut. Very recently. Fresh brush was piled at the sides. There was an entrance over on the far side, where you couldn't see it from the house. This must have been done today. That was what Will had heard. Tom wondered if anybody else had heard it. So many people were out using

power tools that nobody would notice the noise unless it was right outside the window. Most people kind of knew who was doing what, but Will was a little isolated. Still, you can hear sound a long way off around the water. Some of the cut branches had been crushed by a car. Why had the road been cleared?

Will had a lot of land that he'd been hanging onto. It must be pretty valuable. Shore property. Could that have anything to do with all this?

He stopped and listened, heard nothing. Where was Jeb? Tom didn't call out to him.

He walked down to the remains of the old dock. From there, he could just see Milt Swift's island; it was close, but the fog was floating in fast over the water. There was no sign of Jeb. As Tom walked back up the road, something glinted in the brush. He pushed the branches aside and saw Wimbie's car. Beyond it, half hidden by leaves, was a white BMW convertible. Tom couldn't see the license plate.

Behind him the brush cracked, and he turned to see a man with a gun.

"Looks like we're gonna have a full house," the man said. "Put 'em up."

"A real full house, any minute now," Tom replied, raising his hands.

The man, holding the gun on Tom, reached around to open the trunk of Wimbie's car. The trunk lid stuck. In the moment that the man jerked the lid, Tom sent a kick to his gun hand. The gun flew into the brush. The man swung at him, but Tom ducked and socked him, sending him sprawling. Then Tom drew his own gun.

"Get up. You've got two hands now. Open that trunk."

The trunk was empty.

"That was for me all by myself, I guess," Tom said. "Open the trunk of the convertible."

Inside the other trunk Jeb was wild-eyed, gagged, and bound.

Tom slipped the gag off. "Hold on there, Jeb. I'll get to you in a minute." Tom was trying to release the catch on his handcuffs—he used them so rarely it was stuck—when he heard not far away the sound of tires stopping short on dirt.

"Ho!" shouted Tom. He leaned on the horn of Swift's car. Jeb maneuvered himself out of the trunk, looked toward a rusty old mower abandoned in the brush, and hobbled over to it. He backed up and began to work his hand ties on the mower's rusty blade.

Sounds of moving brush and booted footsteps running on dirt preceded a sheriff's deputy.

"Hi, Tom, looks like we came

in the nick of time," he said, drawing his gun.

"Yes. It seems I don't have enough hands."

"I'm right glad to lend you a hand. But it looks like you're doing pretty well by yourself."

"I'm a little old and rusty, but I guess I can still do it."

"We just got home from being over here on that other deal when we got the call to come back. Can't you get your crimes coordinated? We thought we'd done enough traveling for one day."

When the gunman was handcuffed, Tom pulled out his pocket knife and went over to help Jeb.

"Can you tell me what's going on?" the deputy asked.

"Not right now, I can't. But I guess things will explain themselves as we go along. This one's only a kind of minnow, I suspect. We've got to catch us some big fish."

Jeb, untethered and limping, accompanied the three men up the road and through the branches to a car marked SHERIFF in large letters on the side. Another deputy stood beside it.

The doctor approached from the house. "I'm going to take Will home with me until things settle down. He's okay but a little shaken up, and it doesn't seem real safe here. You fellows know where to find him if you need him."

"Take care of Jeb, too, will you?"

"I'm awright."

"You've got a rusty cut and what looks like a bump on the head. When you get fixed up, go back to the office. I'm not sure Geraldine can keep up with all this."

Jeb grunted, feeling at least a little bit useful and part of the excitement. "I was right to look down that road, though, wasn't I?"

"You sure were, Jeb. Aside from your getting wounded in action, it was a real good idea."

Geraldine Hankins, the sometime police secretary and telephone operator, had answered a phone call from Cliff Sanderling. "I can't be bothering the sheriff if you can't say what the trouble is." She sounded fierce.

"Milt Swift got in his boat with three men. One of them was Wimbie Jones. The other two was *strangers!*"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Wimbie, he kind of give me a high sign. Those other two was right odd-looking."

"I can't bother the sheriff for that, and Tom's not picking up the car radio."

"Then I'm going to call the sheriff myself."

"Wait a minute. Here comes Tom's call now."

"Anything happening there?" Tom asked.

"Cliff Sanderling's on the phone saying I should call the sheriff because Mr. Swift took Wimbie Jones and two men out in his boat."

"Then that's where I'm going. There's a sheriff's car here now. They can radio for more help. Tell Cliff thanks. That's what I needed to know. Tell him I need a boat, too. There isn't time to get the police boat around from town."

Tom, in his car, and the two deputies with the handcuffed prisoner in their car drove to the yacht club. The fog was coming in fast.

"They was walking too close together," Cliff said, when Tom had pulled in near the dock, "Wimbie and Milt Swift in front, the two strangers behind. Wimbie kind of winked at me and made a funny face. He'd been around here earlier asking about Milt. The Kingsleys just come in off their boat. I asked if you could have their dinghy. They said, sure. Got lots of boats around here to take without the asking, but I don't like to do that if I can help it."

Among the few cars parked near the dock Tom had recognized the Kingsleys'. Their families been coming here summers for generations; they were nice, decent, quiet people who'd

helped him one way or another over the years. They were standing on the dock, erect and grayhaired. They nodded to Tom.

In the trees, over at the side, Tom saw an unfamiliar car with New Jersey plates.

"That's the car they come in," said Cliff.

"If you have a chance," Tom said to the deputy who would stay with the handcuffed man, "check out that car."

Tom turned to the Kingsleys. "I don't think anything'll happen to the boat. I sure hope not."

"Just the two of you going out there?" Cliff asked.

"I guess there isn't time to gather a posse," Tom replied.

But as they were climbing down the ladder into the dinghy, another sheriff's car screeched up, and a deputy got out. "Looks like I almost missed the boat ride."

"I guess this dinghy's not going to go so fast with a crowd in her, but we'll be grateful for the company." Tom spoke quietly.

"I'm kind of grateful for the fog."

"Wait a little, and they won't see us coming."

"They'll sure hear us, though, the way sound carries."

As the boat started out, both the wharf and the island looked

mysterious in the fog; the sun still gleamed in the moisture.

They rode low in the water with the spray showering them as Tom held the outboard as fast as it would go. He was worrying about Wimbie, worrying about the time they'd lost.

He headed out past the island to make anyone there think the boat was going on by, then he slowed the engine carefully to sound as if they had passed, and then cut it and let the boat drift back on the tide. The deputies paddled a little to steer the dinghy.

Swift's boat was tied up at the dock. Beyond it, a wooded path led up the hill. They docked in silence and started cautiously along the path, single file.

A shot rang past. One of the deputies had already drawn a gun. The other two men drew as they ducked into the woods. A deputy spotted a movement in the brush above and fired. There was a crash and a moan.

They'll have heard those shots in the house, Tom thought. At least they hadn't shot up the Kingsleys' dinghy—yet. He tried not to think about Wimbie.

The house emerged behind spruces, looking out over a cleared field to the sea. It seemed very peaceful.

The groaning led them to a man in the brush near the edge of the clearing. He was clasp-

ing a bleeding belly. The deputy picked up his gun and frisked him to be sure he didn't have another. At the clearing, the three men separated, one deputy going behind a stand of blackberry bushes, the other around a high patch of blooming wild roses to the spruces at the far side.

Tom crouched at the edge of the clearing, looking at the house. He almost grinned when he saw Wimbie at a window. Figuring that Wimbie would distract the man inside, Tom moved quickly to a door at the side of the house. He peered inside and saw a man across the room with a gun in his hand; he must have been after Wimbie. Tom opened the door, then ducked back. The man fired, and Wimbie grabbed him from behind.

"Hey, you two guys stole the show!" a deputy said.

Tom smiled. "You know, I was right glad to have you fellows around today. But I think we ought to give a special award to Cliff Sanderling."

"Do they give an award for silent rowing?" one of the deputies asked.

"What was that all about, anyway? I know what the score is, but I don't know the name of the game we've been playing."

The three strangers had been taken off by police car and ambulance. Milt Swift had gone off with a DEA agent who had arrived on the scene.

"I heard it all," Wimbie said. "The stranger—he calls himself Goshawk, pretty fancy—he and his men had tied me up. I could have got loose along the way, but I was interested in knowing about the game, too. When they left me alone in the island house, I got untied and very, very quietly—that's not easy in those old cottages; you have to wait until a wind comes up and the spruces are creaking, so when you creak a floorboard you hope it sounds like a spruce—I crept to the door of the room they were talking in.

"Goshawk's a drug dealer. No big surprise. He thought this would be a good place to do a little caching and distributing. He was in a hurry because his usual drop got raided. I guess you guys know about that. Swift wants to develop his island, and Goshawk offered to help finance the development in return for a few favors. Heaven help us, we're not supposed to have either drug dealers or developers around here. Anyway, Swift was supposed to buy Will Elton's house for Goshawk. Will's property is so close to the island that you can walk over at low tide. Swift didn't have close access; he had to go by

boat from the yacht club. But Will Elton didn't want to sell, and Swift was stalling Goshawk. In fact, Swift had lied to Goshawk about Will's refusal to sell. Goshawk had seen that old road of Will Elton's on a map and figured he could work all his operations very neatly with control of the two properties."

"I guess Goshawk was mad when he saw how that road had grown up," Tom said. "It's not a road any more—but Will had a power saw, and Goshawk and his men helped themselves to it."

"Swift had got in hot water, but he and I were probably about to get dumped in some good cold Maine seawater," Wimbie said, "weighted down. Swift must have wanted to see me to try to get me to save his skin by protecting him or by getting something on Goshawk. We may never know what he had in mind. Goshawk still had to deal with Will Elton. Goshawk would get back to him when Will had had enough of sitting in the basement and would be ready to sell. I guess that's why he was left there. That's about the story. When I heard the shots, I went to the window. Goshawk heard the house creak as I moved and thought that someone was already inside."

"How did Goshawk know

when Swift was going to go past Elton's house?"

"He'd probably called Swift. Swift would have said he had an appointment about the property at ten, but would meet him afterwards. Goshawk would then have taken over the house and waited for Swift. Something like that."

"How'd he get the car to stop there?" asked a deputy.

"He could have fiddled with the car while it was parked at the dock overnight," Tom said. "Cliff lives close by, but he can't see everything."

"There was a gadget on the front windowsill that might have been some kind of fancy remote-control blocker," Wimbie said. "Well, it's a nice car, even if it did let him down." He sighed. "If only I had a car like that, or a real James Bond car, anything but the heap I drive."

"I'm glad you have just the car you have," Tom said with feeling. "If that trunk lid hadn't stuck, we'd all be in trouble."

Tom and Wimbie went to Will Elton's to get Wimbie's car. The Kingsleys' car was parked in front.

Will met them at the door,

looking chipper. The Kingsleys stood behind him.

"I've decided do it," he said, "with a big sign on the road."

Tom and Wimbie looked confused.

"A restaurant. I've been thinking about it. My daughter used to run a restaurant in Portland. Her husband died, and now she can come back here and liven things up some. How do you like the idea of eating lobster and clams and mussels while looking at the water with a view of the island? I've been thinking it was some lonely around here. Today made up my mind to have some company. I'm going to put this place on the map. The Kingsleys are going to back me."

Tom and Wimbie stared at Will, then at the Kingsleys.

Wimbie turned to Tom. "Did you happen to notice if the food was still in my car?"

"Food?"

"I bought peas and raspberries at Sonny Little's. I got some mussels, too. After all this messing around, I'm starving. My appetite is about the one thing around here that doesn't change."

MYSTERY CLASSIC



The Man Who Cut Off My Hair

by Richard Marsh

My name is Judith Lee. I am a teacher of the deaf and dumb. I teach them by what is called the oral system—that is, the lip-reading system. When people pronounce a word correctly they all make exactly the same movements with their lips, so that, without hearing a sound, you only have to watch them very closely to know what they are saying. Of course, this needs practice, and some people do it better and quicker than others. I suppose I must have a special sort of knack in that direction, because I do not remember a time when, by merely watching people speaking at a distance, no matter at what distance if I could see them clearly, I did not know what they were saying. In my case the gift, or knack, or whatever it is, is hereditary. My father was a teacher of the deaf and dumb—a very successful one. His father was, I believe, one of the originators of the oral system. My mother, when she was first married, had an impediment in her speech which practically made her dumb; though she was stone deaf, she became so expert at lip-reading that she could not only tell what others were saying, but she could speak herself—audibly, although she could not hear her own voice.

So, you see, I have lived in the atmosphere of lip-reading all my life. When people, as they often do, think my skill at it borders on the marvelous, I always explain to them that it is nothing of the kind, that mine is simply a case of “practice makes perfect.” This knack of mine, in a way, is almost equivalent to another sense. It has led me into the most singular situations, and it has been the cause of many really extraordinary adventures. I will tell you of one which happened to me when I was quite a child, the details of which have never faded from my memory.

My father and mother were abroad, and I was staying, with some old and trusted servants, in a little cottage which we had in the country. I suppose I must have been between twelve and thirteen years of age. I was returning by train to the cottage from a short visit which I had been paying to some friends. In my compartment there were two persons besides myself—an elderly woman who sat in front of me, and a man who was at the other end of her seat. At a station not very far from my home the woman got out; a man got in and placed himself beside the one who was already there. I could see they were acquaintances—they began to talk to each other.

They had been talking together for some minutes in such low tones that you could not only not hear their words, you could scarcely tell that they were speaking. But that made no difference

to me; though they spoke in the tiniest whisper I had only to look at their faces to know exactly what they were saying. As a matter of fact, happening to glance up from the magazine I was reading, I saw the man who had been there first say to the other something which gave me quite a start. What he said was this (I only saw the fag-end of the sentence):

"... Myrtle Cottage; it's got a great, old myrtle in the front garden."

The other man said something, but as his face was turned from me I could not see what; the tone in which he spoke was so subdued that hearing was out of the question. The first man replied (whose face was to me):

"His name is Colegate. He's an old bachelor who uses the place as a summer cottage. I know him well—all the dealers know him. He's got some of the finest old silver in England. There's a Charles II salt-cellar in the place which would fetch twenty pounds an ounce anywhere."

The other man sat up erect and shook his head, looking straight in front of him, so that I could see what he said, though he spoke only in a whisper.

"Old silver is no better than new; you can only melt it."

The other man seemed to grow quite warm.

"Only melt it! Don't be a fool; you don't know what you're talking about. I can get rid of old silver at good prices to collectors all over the world; they don't ask too many questions when they think they're getting a bargain. That stuff at Myrtle Cottage is worth to us well over a thousand; I shall be surprised if I don't get more for it."

The other man must have glanced at me while I was watching his companion speak. He was a fairhaired man, with a pair of light blue eyes, and quite a nice complexion. He whispered to his friend:

"That infernal kid is watching us as if she were all eyes."

The other said: "Let her watch. Much good may it do her; she can't hear a word—goggle-eyed brat!"

What he meant by "goggle-eyed" I didn't know, and it was true that I could not hear; but, as it happened, it was not necessary that I should. I think the other must have been suspicious, because he replied, if possible, in a smaller whisper than ever:

"I should like to twist her skinny neck and throw her out on to the line."

He looked as if he could do it too; such an unpleasant look came into his eyes that it quite frightened me. After all, I was alone with

them; I was quite small; it would have been perfectly easy for him to have done what he said he would like to. So I glanced back at my magazine, and left the rest of their conversation unwatched.

But I had heard, or rather seen, enough to set me thinking. I knew Myrtle Cottage quite well, and the big myrtle tree; it was not very far from our own cottage. And I knew Mr. Colegate and his collection of old silver—particularly that Charles II salt-cellar of which he was so proud. What interest had it for these two men? Had Mr. Colegate come to the cottage? He was not there when I left. Or had Mr. and Mrs. Baines, who kept house for him—had they come? I was so young and so simple that it never occurred to me that there could be anything sinister about these two whispering gentlemen.

They both of them got out at the station before ours. Ours was a little village station, with a platform on only one side of the line; the one at which they got out served for quite an important place—our local market town. I thought no more about them, but I did think of Mr. Colegate and of Myrtle Cottage. Dickson, our housekeeper, said that she did not believe that anyone was at the cottage, but she owned that she was not sure. So after tea I went for a stroll, without saying a word to anyone—Dickson had such a troublesome habit of wanting to know exactly where you were going. My stroll took me to Myrtle Cottage.

It stood all by itself in a most secluded situation on the other side of Woodbarrow Common. You could scarcely see the house from the road—it was quite a little house. When I got into the garden and saw that the front room window was open I jumped to the very natural conclusion that someone must be there. I went quickly to the window—I was on the most intimate terms with everyone about the place; I should never have dreamt of announcing my presence in any formal manner—and looked in. What I saw did surprise me.

In the room was the man of the train—the man who had been in my compartment first. He had what seemed to me to be Mr. Colegate's entire collection of old silver spread out on the table in front of him, and that very moment he was holding up that gem of the collection—the Charles II salt-cellar. I had moved very quietly, meaning to take Mr. Colegate—if it was he—by surprise; but I doubt if I had made a noise that that man would have heard me, he was so wrapped up in that apple of Mr. Colegate's eye.

I did not know what to make of it at all. I did not know what to think. What was that man doing there? What was I to do? Should I speak to him? I was just trying to make up my mind when some-

one from behind lifted me right off my feet and, putting a hand to my throat, squeezed it so tightly that it hurt me.

"If you make a sound I'll choke the life right out of you. Don't you make any mistake about it—I will!"

He said that out loudly enough, though it was not so very loud either—he spoke so close to my ear. I could scarcely breathe, but I could still see, and I could see that the man who held me so horribly by the throat was the second man of the train. The recognition seemed to be mutual.

"If it isn't that infernal brat! She seemed to be all eyes in the railway carriage, and, my word, she seems to have been all ears, too."

The first man had come to the window.

"What's up?" he asked. "Who's that kid you've got hold of there?"

My captor twisted my face round for the other to look at.

"Can't you see for yourself? I felt, somehow, that she was listening."

"She couldn't have heard, even if she was; no one could have heard what we were saying. Hand her in here." I was passed through the window to the other, who kept as tight a grip on my throat as his friend had done.

"Who are you?" he asked. "I'll give you a chance to answer, but if you try to scream I'll twist your head right off you."

He loosed his grip just enough to enable me to answer if I wished. But I did not wish. I kept perfectly still. His companion said:

"What's the use of wasting time? Slit her throat and get done with it."

He took from the table a dreadful-looking knife, with a blade eighteen inches long, which I knew very well. Mr. Colegate had it in his collection because of its beautifully chased, massive silver handle. It had belonged to one of the old Scottish chieftains; Mr. Colegate would sometimes make me go all over gooseflesh by telling me of some of the awful things for which, in the old, lawless, bloodthirsty days in Scotland, it was supposed to have been used. I knew that he kept it in beautiful condition, with the edge as sharp as a razor. So you can fancy what my feelings were when that man drew the blade across my throat, so close to the skin that it all but grazed me.

"Before you cut her throat," observed his companion, "we'll tie her up. We'll make short work of her. This bit of rope will about do the dodge."

He had what looked to me like a length of clothesline in his hand. With it, between them, they tied me to a great oak chair, so tight that it seemed to cut right into me, and lest I should scream with the pain, the man with the blue eyes tied something across my mouth in a way which made it impossible for me to utter a sound. Then he threatened me with that knife again, and just as I made sure he was going to cut my throat he caught hold of my hair, which, of course, was hanging down my back, and with that dreadful knife sawed the whole of it from my head.

If I could have got within reach of him at that moment I believe that I should have stuck that knife into him. Rage made me half beside myself. He had destroyed what was almost the dearest thing in the world to me—not because of my own love of it, but on account of my mother's. My mother had often quoted to me, "The glory of a woman is her hair," and she would add that mine was very beautiful. There certainly was a great deal of it. She was so proud of my hair that she had made me proud of it too—for her sake. And to think that this man could have robbed me of it in so hideous a way! I do believe that at the moment I could have killed him.

I suppose he saw the fury which possessed me, because he laughed and struck me across the face with my own hair.

"I've half a mind to cram it down your throat," he said. "It didn't take me long to cut it off, but I'll cut your throat even quicker—if you so much as try to move, my little dear."

The other man said to him:

"She can't move and she can't make a sound either. You leave her alone. Come over here and attend to business."

"I'll learn her," replied the other man, and he lifted my hair above my head and let it fall all over me.

They proceeded to wrap up each piece of Mr. Colegate's collection in tissue paper, and then to pack the whole into two queer-shaped bags—pretty heavy they must have been. It was only then that I realized what they were doing—they were stealing Mr. Colegate's collection; they were going to take it away. The fury which possessed me as I sat there, helpless, and watched them! The pain was bad enough, but my rage was worse. When the man who had cut off my hair moved to the window with one of the bags held in both his hands—it was as much as he could carry—he said to his companion, with a glance towards me: "Hadn't I better cut her throat before I go?"

"You can come and do that presently," replied the other, "you'll

find her waiting." Then he dropped his voice and I saw him say: "Now you quite understand?" The other nodded. "What is it?"

The face of the man who had cut my hair was turned towards me. He put his lips very close to the other, speaking in the tiniest whisper, which he never dreamed could reach my ears: "Cotterill, Cloakroom, Victoria Station, Brighton Railway."

The other whispered, "That's right. You'd better make a note of it; we don't want any bungling."

"No fear, I'm not likely to forget." Then he repeated his previous words: "Cotterill, Cloakroom, Victoria Station, Brighton Railway."

He whispered this so very earnestly that I felt sure there was something about the words which was most important; by the time he had said them a second time they were printed on my brain quite as indelibly as they were on his. He got out of the window and his bag was passed to him; then he spoke a parting word to me.

"Sorry I can't take a lock of your hair with me; perhaps I'll come back for one presently."

Then he went. If he had known the passion which was blazing in my heart! That allusion to my desecrated locks only made it burn still fiercer. His companion, left alone, paid no attention to me whatever. He continued to secure his bag, searched the room, as if for anything which might have been overlooked, then, bearing the bag with the other half of Mr. Colegate's collection with him, he went through the door, ignoring my presence as if I had never existed. What he did afterwards I cannot say; I saw no more of him; I was left alone—all through the night.

What a night it was. I was not afraid; I can honestly say that I have seldom been afraid of anything—I suppose it is a matter of temperament—but I was most uncomfortable, very unhappy, and each moment the pain caused me by my bonds seemed to be growing greater. I do believe that the one thing which enabled me to keep my senses all through the night was the constant repetition of those mystic words: "Cotterill, Cloakroom, Victoria Station, Brighton Railway." In the midst of my trouble I was glad that what some people call my curious gift had enabled me to see what I was quite sure they had never meant should reach my understanding. What the words meant I had no notion; in themselves they seemed to be silly words. But that they had some hidden, weighty meaning I was so sure that I kept saying them over and over again lest they should slip through my memory.

I do not know if I ever closed my eyes; I certainly never slept.

I saw the first gleams of light usher in the dawn of another morning, and I knew the sun had risen. I wondered what they were doing at home—between the repetitions of that cryptic phrase. Was Dickson looking for me? I rather wished I had let her know where I was going; then she might have had some idea of where to look. As it was she had none. I had some acquaintances three or four miles off, with whom I would sometimes go to tea and, without warning to anyone at home, stay the night. I am afraid that, even as a child, my habits were erratic. Dickson might think I was staying with them, and, if so, she would not even trouble to look for me. In that case I might have to stay where I was for days.

I do not know what time it was, but it seemed to me that it had been light for weeks, and that the day must be nearly gone, when I heard steps outside the open window. I was very nearly in a state of stupor, but I had still sense enough to wonder if it was that man who had cut my hair come back again to cut my throat. As I watched the open sash my heart began to beat more vigorously than it had for a very long time. What, then, was my relief when there presently appeared, on the other side of it, the face of Mr. Colegate, the owner of Myrtle Cottage. I tried to scream—with joy, but that cloth across my mouth prevented my uttering a sound.

I never shall forget the look which came on Mr. Colegate's face when he saw me. He rested his hands on the sill as if he wondered how the window came to be open, then when he looked in and saw me, what a jump he gave.

"Judith!" he exclaimed. "Judith Lee! Surely it is Judith Lee!"

He was a pretty old man, or he seemed so to me, but I doubt if a boy could have got through that window quicker than he did. He was by my side in less than no time; with a knife which he took from his pocket he was severing my bonds. The agony which came over me as they were loosed! It was worse than anything which had gone before. The moment my mouth was free I exclaimed—even then I was struck by the funny, hoarse voice in which I seemed to be speaking:

"Cotterill, Cloakroom, Victoria Station, Brighton Railway."

So soon as I had got those mysterious words out of my poor, parched throat I fainted; the agony I was suffering, the strain which I had gone through, proved too much for me. I knew dimly that I was tumbling into Mr. Colegate's arms, and then I knew no more.

When I came back to life I was in bed. Dickson was at my bedside, and Dr. Scott, and Mr. Colegate, and Pierce, the village policeman, and a man who I afterwards knew was a detective, who had been

sent over posthaste from a neighboring town. I wondered where I was, and then I saw I was in a room in Myrtle Cottage. I sat up in bed, put up my hands—then it all came back to me.

"He cut off my hair with MacGregor's knife!" MacGregor was the name of the Highland chieftain to whom, according to Mr. Colegate, that dreadful knife had belonged.

When it did all come back to me and I realized what had happened, and felt how strange my head seemed without its accustomed covering, nothing would satisfy me but that they should bring me a looking-glass. When I saw what I looked like, the rage which had possessed me when the outrage first took place surged through me with greater force than ever. Before they could stop me, or even guess what I was going to do, I was out of bed and facing them. That cryptic utterance came back to me as if of its own initiative; it burst from my lips.

"'Cotterill, Cloakroom, Victoria Station, Brighton Railway!' Where are my clothes? That's where the man is who cut off my hair."

They stared at me. I believe that for a moment they thought that what I had endured had turned my brain, and that I was mad. But I soon made it perfectly clear that I was nothing of the kind. I told them my story as fast as I could speak; I fancy I brought it home to their understanding. Then I told them of the words which I had seen spoken in such a solemn whisper, and how sure I was that they were pregnant with weighty meaning.

"'Cotterill, Cloakroom, Victoria Station, Brighton Railway'—that's where the man is who cut my hair off—that's where I'm going to catch him."

The detective was pleased to admit that there might be something in my theory, and that it would be worth while to go up to Victoria Station to see what the words might mean. Nothing would satisfy me but that we should go at once. I was quite convinced that every moment was of importance, and that if we were not quick we should be too late. I won Mr. Colegate over—of course, he was almost as anxious to get his collection back as I was to be quits with the miscreant who had shorn me of my locks. So we went up to town by the first train we could catch—Mr. Colegate, the detective, and an excited and practically hairless child.

When we got to Victoria Station we marched straight up to the cloakroom, and the detective said to one of the persons on the other side of the counter:

"Is there a parcel here for the name of Cotterill?"

The person to whom he had spoken did not reply, but another man who was standing by his side.

"Cotterill? A parcel for the name of Cotterill has just been taken out—a handbag, scarcely more than half a minute ago. You must have seen him walking off with it as you came up. He can hardly be out of sight now." Leaning over the counter, he looked along the platform.

"There he is—someone is just going to speak to him."

I saw the person to whom he referred—a shortish man in a light grey suit, carrying a brown leather handbag. I also saw the person who was going to speak to him; and thereupon I ceased to have eyes for the man with the bag. I broke into exclamation.

"There's the man who cut my hair!" I cried. I went rushing along the platform as hard as I could go. Whether the man heard me or not I cannot say; I daresay I had spoken loudly enough; but he gave one glance in my direction, and when he saw me I had no doubt that he remembered. He whispered to the man with the bag. I was near enough to see, though not to hear, what he said. In spite of the rapidity with which his lips were moving, I saw quite distinctly.

"Bantock, 13 Harwood Street, Oxford Street." That was what he said, and no sooner had he said it than he turned and fled—from me; I knew he was flying from me, and it gave me huge satisfaction to know that the mere sight of me had made him run. I was conscious that Mr. Colegate and the detective were coming at a pretty smart pace behind me.

The man with the bag, seeing his companion dart off without the slightest warning, glanced round to see what had caused his hasty flight. I suppose he saw me and the detective and Mr. Colegate, and he drew his own conclusions. He dropped that handbag as if it had been red hot, and off he ran. He ran to such purpose that we never caught him—neither him nor the man who had cut my hair. The station was full of people—a train had just come in. The crowd streaming out covered the platform with a swarm of moving figures. They acted as cover to those two eager gentlemen—they got clean off. But we got the bag; and, one of the station officials coming on the scene, we were shown to an apartment where, after explanations had been made, the bag and its contents were examined.

Of course, we had realized from the very first moment that Mr.

Colegate's collection could not possibly be in that bag, because it was not nearly large enough. When it was seen what was in it, something like a sensation was created. It was crammed with small articles of feminine clothing. In nearly every garment jewels were wrapped, which fell out of them as they were withdrawn from the bag. Such jewels! You should have seen the display they made when they were spread out upon the leather-covered table—and our faces as we stared at them.

"This does not look like my collection of old silver," observed Mr. Colegate.

"No," remarked a big, broad-shouldered man, who I afterwards learned was a well-known London detective who had been induced by our detective to join our party.

"This does not look like your collection of old silver, sir; it looks, if you'll excuse my saying so, like something very much more worth finding. Unless I am mistaken, these are the Duchess of Datchet's jewels, some of which she wore at the last Drawing Room, and which were taken from Her Grace's bedroom after her return. The police all over Europe have been looking for them for more than a month."

"That bag has been with us nearly a month. The party who took it out paid four and sixpence for cloakroom charges—twopence a day for twenty-seven days."

The person from the cloakroom had come with us to that apartment; it was he who said this. The London detective replied:

"Paid four and sixpence, did he? Well, it was worth it—to us. Now, if I could lay my hand on the party who put the bag in the cloakroom, I might have a word of a kind to say to him."

I had been staring, wide-eyed, as piece by piece the contents of the bag had been disclosed; I had been listening, open-eared, to what the detective said; when he made that remark about laying his hands on the party who had deposited that bag in the cloakroom, there came into my mind the words which I had seen the man who had cut my hair whisper as he fled to the man with the bag. The cryptic sentence which I had seen him whisper as I sat tied to the chair had indeed proved to be full of meaning; the words which, even in the moment of flight, he had felt bound to utter might be just as full. I ventured on an observation, the first which I had made, speaking with a good deal of diffidence.

"I think I know where he might be found—I am not sure, but I think."

All eyes were turned to me. The detective exclaimed:

"You think you know? As we haven't got so far as thinking, if you were to tell us, little lady, what you think, it might be as well, mightn't it?"

I considered—I wanted to get the words exactly right.

"Suppose you were to try—" I paused so as to make quite sure—"Bantock, 13 Harwood Street, Oxford Street."

"And who is Bantock?" the detective asked. "And what do you know about him anyhow?"

"I don't know anything at all about him, but I saw the man who cut my hair whisper to the other man just before he ran away, 'Bantock, 13 Harwood Street, Oxford Street'—I saw him quite distinctly."

"You saw him whisper? What does the girl mean by saying she saw him whisper? Why, young lady, you must have been quite fifty feet away. How, at that distance, and with all the noise of the traffic, could you hear a whisper?"

"I didn't say I heard him; I said I saw him. I don't need to hear to know what a person is saying. I just saw you whisper to the other man, 'The young lady seems to be by way of being a curiosity.'"

The London detective stared at our detective. He seemed to be bewildered.

"But I—I don't know how you heard that; I scarcely breathed the words."

Mr. Colegate explained. When they heard they all seemed to be bewildered, and they looked at me, as people do look at the present day, as if I were some strange and amazing thing. The London detective said: "I never heard the like to that. It seems to me very much like what old fashioned people called 'black magic.'"

Although he was a detective, he could not have been a very intelligent person after all, or he would not have talked such nonsense. Then he added, with an accent on the "saw":

"What was it you said you saw him whisper?"

I bargained before I told him.

"I will tell you if you let me come with you."

"Let you come with me?" He stared still more. "What does the girl mean?"

"Her presence," stuck in Mr. Colegate, "may be useful for purposes of recognition. She won't be in the way; you can do no harm by letting her come."

"If you don't promise to let me come I shan't tell you."

The big man laughed. He seemed to find me amusing; I do not know why. If he had only understood my feeling on the subject of my hair, and how I yearned to be even with the man who had wrought me what seemed to me such an irreparable injury. I dare say it sounds as if I were very revengeful. I do not think it was a question of vengeance only; I wanted justice. The detective took out a fat notebook.

"Very well; it's a bargain. Tell me what you saw him whisper, and you shall come." So I told him again, and he wrote it down. "Bantock, 13 Harwood Street, Oxford Street." I know Harwood Street, though I don't know Mr. Bantock. But he seems to be residing at what is generally understood to be an unlucky number. Let me get a message through to the Yard—we may want assistance. Then we'll pay a visit to Mr. Bantock—if there is such a person. It sounds like a very tall story to me."

I believe that even then he doubted if I had seen what I said I saw. When we did start I was feeling pretty nervous, because I realized that if we were going on a fool's errand, and there did turn out to be no Bantock, that London detective would doubt me more than ever. And, of course, I could not be sure that there was such a person, though it was some comfort to know that there was a Harwood Street. We went four in a cab—the two detectives, Mr. Colegate, and I. We had gone some distance before the cab stopped. The London detective said:

"This is Harwood Street; I told the driver to stop at the corner—we will walk the rest of the way. A cab might arouse suspicion; you never know."

It was a street full of shops. No. 13 proved to be a sort of curiosity shop and jeweler's combined; quite a respectable-looking place, and sure enough, over the top of the window was the name "Bantock."

"That looks as if, at any rate, there were a Bantock," the big man said; it was quite a weight off my own mind when I saw the name.

Just as we reached the shop a cab drew up and five men got out whom the London detective seemed to recognize with mingled feelings.

"That's queered the show," he exclaimed. I did not know what he meant. "They rouse suspicion, if they do nothing else—so in we go."

And in we went—the detective first, and I close on his heels.

There were two young men standing close together behind the counter. The instant we appeared I saw one whisper to the other:

"Give them the office—ring the alarm bell—they're 'tecs!"

I did not quite know what he meant either, but I guessed enough to make me cry out:

"Don't let him move—he's going to ring the alarm bell and give them the office."

Those young men were so startled—they must have been quite sure that I could not have heard—that they both stood still and stared; before they had got over their surprise a detective—they were detectives who had come in the second cab—had each by the shoulder.

There was a door at the end of the shop, which the London detective opened.

"There's a staircase here; we'd better go up and see who's above. You chaps keep yourselves handy, you may be wanted—when I call you, come."

He mounted the stairs—as before, I was as close to him as I could very well get. On the top of the staircase was a landing, onto which two doors opened. We paused to listen: I could distinctly hear voices coming through one of them.

"I think this is ours," the London detective said.

He opened the one through which the voices were coming. He marched in—I was still as close to him as I could get. In it were several men, I did not know how many, and I did not care; I had eyes for only one. I walked right past the detective up to the table round which some of them were sitting, some standing, and stretching out an accusatory arm I pointed at one.

"That's the man who cut off my hair!"

It was, and well he knew it. His conscience must have smitten him; I should not have thought that a grown man could be so frightened at the sight of a child. He caught hold, with both hands, of the side of the table; he glared at me as if I were some dreadful apparition—and no doubt to him I was. It was only with an effort that he seemed able to use his voice.

"Good night!" he exclaimed, "it's that infernal kid!"

On the table, right in front of me, I saw something with which I was only too familiar. I snatched it up.

"And this is the knife," I cried, "with which he did it!"

It was; the historical blade which had once belonged to the sanguinary and, I sincerely trust, more or less apocryphal

MacGregor. I held it out towards the gaping man.

"You know that this is the knife with which you cut off my hair," I said. "You know it is."

I daresay I looked a nice young termagant with my short hair, rage in my eyes, and that frightful weapon in my hand. Apparently I did not impress him quite as I had intended—at least, his demeanor did not suggest it.

"By the living jingo!" he shouted, "I wish I had cut her throat with it as well!"

It was fortunate for him that he did not. Probably, in the long run, he would have suffered for it more than he did—though he suffered pretty badly as it was. It was his cutting my hair that did it. Had he not done that, I have little doubt that I should have been too conscious of the pains caused me by my bonds—the marks caused by the cord were on my skin for weeks after—to pay such close attention to their proceedings as I did under the spur of anger. Quite possibly that telltale whisper would have gone unnoticed. Absorbed by my own suffering, I should have paid very little heed to the cryptic sentence which really proved to be their undoing. It was the outrage to my locks which caused me to strain every faculty of observation I had. He had much better have left them alone.

That was the greatest capture the police had made for years. In one haul they captured practically every member of a gang of cosmopolitan thieves who were wanted by the police all over the world. The robbery of Mr. Colegate's collection of old silver shrank into insignificance before the rest of their misdeeds. And not only were the thieves taken themselves, but the proceeds of no end of robberies.

It seemed that they had met there for a sort of annual division of the common spoil. There was an immense quantity of valuable property before them on the table, and lots more about the house. Those jewels which were in the bag which had been deposited at the cloakroom at Victoria Station were to have been added to the common fund—to say nothing of Mr. Colegate's collection of old silver.

The man who called himself Bantock, and who owned the premises at 13 Harwood Street, proved to be a well-known dealer in precious stones and jewelry and bric-a-brac and all sorts of valuables. He was immensely rich; it was shown that a great deal of his money had been made by buying and selling valuable stolen property of every sort and kind. Before the police had done with

him it was made abundantly clear that, under various aliases, in half the countries of the world, he had been a wholesale dealer in stolen goods. He was sentenced to a long term of penal servitude. I am not quite sure, but I believe that he died in jail.

All the men who were in that room were sent to prison for different terms, including the man who cut my hair—to say nothing of his companion. So far as the proceedings at the court were concerned, I never appeared at all. Compared to some of the crimes of which they had been guilty, the robbery of Mr. Colegate's silver was held to be a mere nothing. They were not charged with it at all, so my evidence was not required. But every time I looked at my scanty locks, which took years to grow to anything like a decent length—they had reached to my knees, but they never did that again—each time I stood before a looking-glass and saw what a curious spectacle I presented with my closely clipped poll, something of that old rage came back to me which had been during that first moment in my heart, and I felt—what I felt when I was tied to that chair in Myrtle Cottage. I endeavored to console myself, in the spirit of the Old World rather than the New, that, owing to the gift which was mine, I had been able to cry something like quits with the man who, in a moment of mere wanton savagery, had deprived me of what ought to be the glory of a woman.

SOLUTION TO THE JUNE "UNSOLVED":

- | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Fol, truthteller | 4. Gooth, truthteller |
| 2. Fu, liar | 5. Fo, truthteller |
| 3. Fy, liar | 6. Barjuk, liar |
| 7. Fumfum, liar | |

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by Mary Cannon



Illustration by Jim Galsen

The **Widows Club** is Dorothy Cannell's newest, and she can definitely crow about it! Ellie Simon, the irrepressible heroine and narrator of *The Thin Woman*, has been married to her beloved Ben but a few months when tragedy strikes. Will she find solace in the sisterhood of the sinister Widows Club, one day to proudly wear a symbolic brooch (a line of enameled crows) on her lapel, too? Or will she find the will power to stop compulsively dieting, and instead lend her support to Primrose and Hyacinth Tramwell, elderly sisters and proprietors of the Flowers Detective Agency (and stars of Cannell's second novel, *Down the Garden Path*)? Tongue placed firmly in cheek, Cannell richly explores love and marriage in all its permutations against a background of charming British village life. Ellie herself is a bracing tonic, and she's admirably supported by the Tramwells, her eccentric in-laws, her tippling housekeeper, and minor characters that include a burgling butler and tame goose named Mother. There is murder, and a threat from more than one source, and Cannell has given the plot a breathtakingly devilish twist. I was suffering withdrawal symptoms minutes after putting the book down, but I have a single consolation. Ellie describes herself as "the sort of woman who bred disaster the way hamsters breed hamsters." I have high hopes that she'll get herself into another wildly witty jam very soon. (Bantam Books, \$15.95, 352 pp.)

Carolyn G. Hart's ebullient heroine, mystery-bookstore owner Annie Laurence, is commissioned by the snooty Historical Preservation Society in a nearby South Carolina town to stage a Mystery Night as part of the activities at their annual antebellum house and garden tour. The result is **Design for Murder** (Bantam, \$3.50, 271 pp.), and it's more fun than any old-house tour has a right to be. Annie finds herself the chief suspect when life dramatically imitates art, and the local police are the folks crying "Author!" With the able assistance of her fiancé, the dapper Max, Annie must find one motive among many, and locate a killer who is all too ready to strike again. Annie shrewdly figures that if she can't keep the three-night mystery contest going, as well as save her neck from the noose, several of the more competitive contestants are liable to kill her anyway. Hart has a light touch with her characters, a fresh heroine in Annie, and a delightfully different setting—not to mention the frequent name-dropping of authentic mystery authors, books, plots, *et al.*

It's wintertime in Minnesota, and Professor Owen Davis-Williams should be settled in front of his hearth, correcting student efforts, enjoying the familiar if uninspiring company of his long-time spouse, and working steadily on his Guggenheim-grant project. Davis-Williams is, after all, a respected poet and teacher, a man of sense and wit, an academic past his mid-life crises. But Davis-Williams is doing none of those things. Instead, he's digging into the events of the past summer when one of his annual poetry workshops ended abruptly with a shocking act of violence. Davis-Williams can't accept the fact of an unsolved murder's developing from his workshop, an affair usually attended by a smallish group of amateurish but congenial poets who work hard for this one week in idyllic conditions: under the tutelage of a well-known poet teacher and under the roof of a somewhat old fashioned resort hotel in a bucolic northern location. Davis-Williams cannot rest until he learns the truth . . . but the truth may never let him rest again. L.A. Taylor's **Poetic Justice** (Walker, \$16.95, 232 pp.) silkily weaves a web that ensnares our attention, luring us in further just as its protagonist is pulled along; and at its heart the truth is as unlovely as any spider. *Poetic Justice* is a haunting tale deftly told, with just a twist of irony.

Dan O'Brien's first novel, **The Spirit of the Hills** (Crown, \$16.95, 256 pp.), could be called a contemporary crime fiction piece. A Vietnam vet comes to the Black Hills to find the pusher who murdered his younger brother. A beautiful Sioux woman returns

to her South Dakota homeland and is quickly absorbed into a group of Sioux who are legally protesting Sioux land appropriations—and a splinter group who scoffs at the idea of remaining within the law. Finally, the last of the great wolf trappers, Bill Egan, is brought out of retirement to stalk a mysterious predator that has been killing livestock. These three people, as well as events, converge in a moving climax. O'Brien writes lyrically of the people and landscape of South Dakota, home of Mt. Rushmore and more; and Bill Egan, his philosophy and his rapport with the almost-extinct wolf, is a character alone worth the price of the book.

Sharon McCone returns in Marcia Muller's **Eye of the Storm** (Mysterious Press, \$15.95, 224 pp.), and readers should welcome her with open arms because this is a wonderful book—warm with family relationships, rich in locale, spiced with a classic plot. Sharon's sister Patsy comes to San Francisco to ask Sharon for a favor: could she come out to Patsy's new home, an old decaying mansion set in its own island in the delta region of inland California? Someone has been playing a few nasty tricks and has scared the local workmen off—something to do with a ghost and a curse on the estate which Patsy and a few recent acquaintances have purchased and are renovating into a fancy restaurant and bed/breakfast hotel. This book has it all, including more than one hair-raising action scene and a great "dark and stormy night" setup. Soon the semi-friends are eyeing one another warily, and Sharon is turning up more than one motive for murder. Fans of other series featuring female P.I.'s should discover Sharon McCone at last—if not sooner.

Carl Wilcox certainly isn't your average private eye. For one thing, his turf is South Dakota in the Depression years. For another, Carl is an ex-con not overly worried about the ethics of everyday situations, and his everyday situations tend to be less glamorous, perhaps, than your run-of-the-mill L.A. situation. No less deadly, perhaps. Take the case of Ellsworth Ellison, who unhappily met a train one dark night—met the train head on, that is. That's part of Carl's latest investigation in **The Man Who Met the Train** (Mysterious Press, \$15.95, 240 pp.). Author Harold Adams pulls no punches in this small-town story of greed and murder, even though his characters "mosey" around town and "gab" to one another over "icebox cookies" and iced tea. By novel's end we have been shown that "the good old days" saw their share of evil.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



A man staggers into a police station to report a murder—his own. He is in effect D.O.A., “dead on arrival.” Two days earlier, for no apparent reason, he had been fatally poisoned by a person or persons unknown. As far as he knew he had no enemies, yet someone wanted to kill him. There is no antidote for the poison, which is fatal in forty-eight hours at most. And so, in his few remaining moments of life he offers to tell the police what has transpired since he was poisoned. This is the premise of *D.O.A.*—one of the most riveting ever devised for a suspense movie.

The original *D.O.A.* starred the solid journeyman actor, Edmund O’Brien, as an insurance broker who has to be eliminated because he may remember a potentially incriminating document he routinely notarized for a stranger. His only

lead to his killer is the message that someone was phoning him repeatedly at his office only hours before he was poisoned. When he now dials the number that was left, a secretary tells him that his caller has just died. O’Brien goes to the office from which the calls were made. He harasses the secretary, the dead man’s partner, wife, and everyone else he runs into until he figures out what kind of criminal deal lay behind the document he notarized and who would need to kill him.

In the new *D.O.A.* the leading man, Dennis Quaid, is glamorous where O’Brien was plain, and can think of numerous people who might want to kill him. As a result of such changes, the new version, far from replicating the existential nightmare of the first, feels like a standard mystery.

As a bespectacled college professor, Quaid, whose 1987 per-

formances in both *The Big Easy* and *Suspect* were praised in this column, again handles his role well. But his part seems to have been modeled on Harrison Ford's Indiana Jones, who is amusingly transformed from a similarly bespectacled, mild professor into an adventurer in search of buried treasure.

The old *D.O.A.*, a modest second feature or B-movie, pressed relentlessly from scene to scene with the characteristic economy of the form. The newspaper advertisement for the new *D.O.A.* gets across the idea of urgency by showing Dennis Quaid bound to a giant clock, but the movie itself slows down for a subplot of Quaid's being divorced by his wife, and for a romance with a coed. The script pauses repeatedly to philosophize over Quaid's having gone

from the death-in-life cynicism of a blocked writer to the life-in-death heightened awareness of a man determined to find his murderer before he dies.

The 1949 *D.O.A.*, at first known only to aficionados of the *film noir* genre, later became familiar to late night viewers of movies on television, where it now shows in a surprisingly attractive colorized version. Its charm lay in its low-budget, necessarily close adherence to its marvelous premise. But in a day when there are no second features at the movies, all kinds of compromises have to be made in the effort to attract large audiences. In the case of the 1988 version of *D.O.A.*, the handsome leading man cannot be a lowly insurance broker. Nor can the expensive script writer resist providing him with clever observations on the meaning of his fate. At all costs the hero must make love to a starlet, be repeatedly put in mortal danger (somewhat beside the point for a man about to die anyway), and be photographed in colorful locations—here the University of Texas and downtown Austin. If only it had been possible to spend several million dollars less on *D.O.A.*, it might have turned out to be a better movie.



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Doomed Professor Dexter Cornelli (Dennis Quaid) on the trail of his murderer with undergrad Sydney Fuller (Meg Ryan).

THE STORY THAT WON



The February Mysterious by Gene Arden Thompson of able mentions go to Walt Jersey; B. I. Chance of Sub-Keathley of Mesa, Arizona; Arthur P. Cosing, Jr., of Arlington, Virginia; Alfred W. Cross of Sacramento, California; Patrick J. Healey of Novato, California; Josh Crutcher of Boulder, Colorado; and Angie Deal of Trochee, Alberta, Canada.

Photograph contest was won Brigham City, Utah. Honor-Denekas of Belle Mead, New limity, Oregon; Dorothy

ELIMINATION OF IRRESPONSIBLE OCCURRENCES (E.I.O.)

by Gene Arden Thompson

As the fog began to lift, Homer and Rex took their positions. An eerie silence prevailed throughout the McDonald farmyard as the inhabitants stood guard and waited . . . waited in silence.

The previous night's emergency meeting of the Crime Watch Society had for the first time in the history of McDonald's brought them all together for a common cause. Stamp out the crime that had been running rampant in the area.

It had started on a small scale, when Morris reported his wife's kittens had lost their mittens. At first it was presumed they had just misplaced them, but a thorough search had failed to turn up a clue. This was followed by the brutal attack on three blind mice with a carving knife, and now Lil Bo Peep had lost her sheep!

Representatives from the entire animal kingdom of McDonald's had met in emergency counsel and had unanimously agreed *something must be done*.

When word of the Crime Watch Society's action was released, the results were astounding. The farmer's wife was tried and convicted of felonious assault and is now serving five years' probation. The mittens were returned anonymously, and Bo Peep's sheep were released by their captors and returned wagging their tails behind them.

To this day, McDonald's farm serves as an example of what can be accomplished when society works together for the betterment of all.

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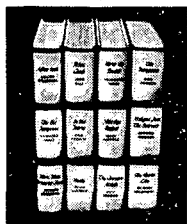
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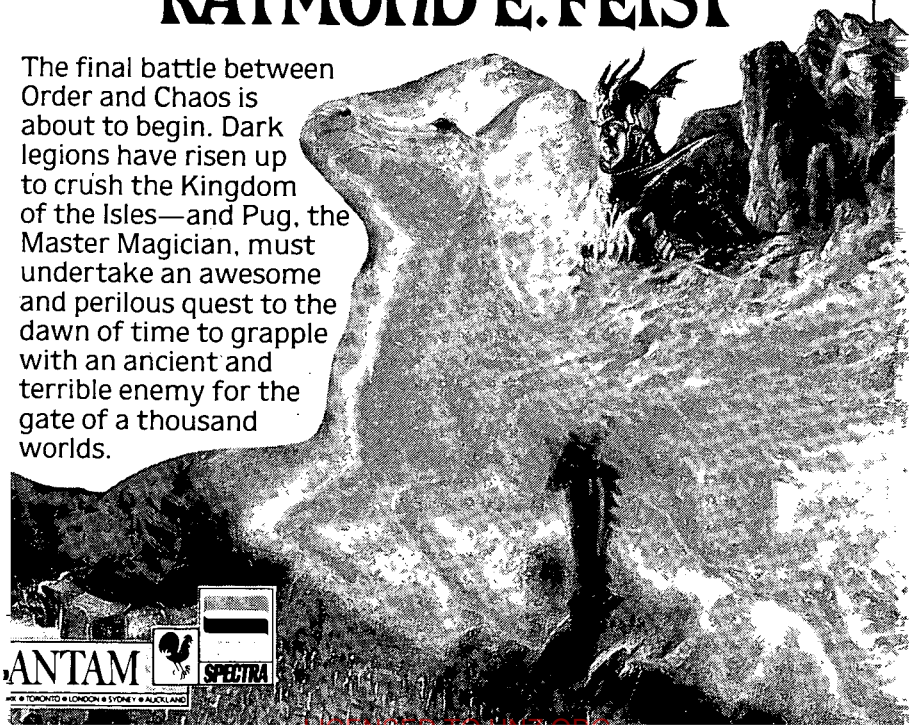
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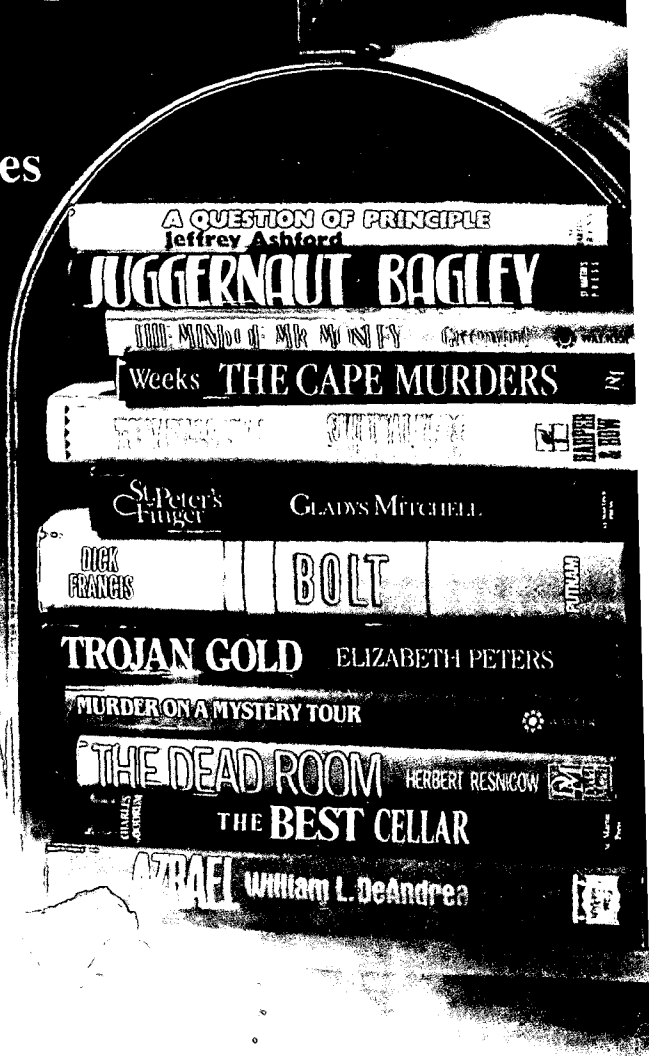


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